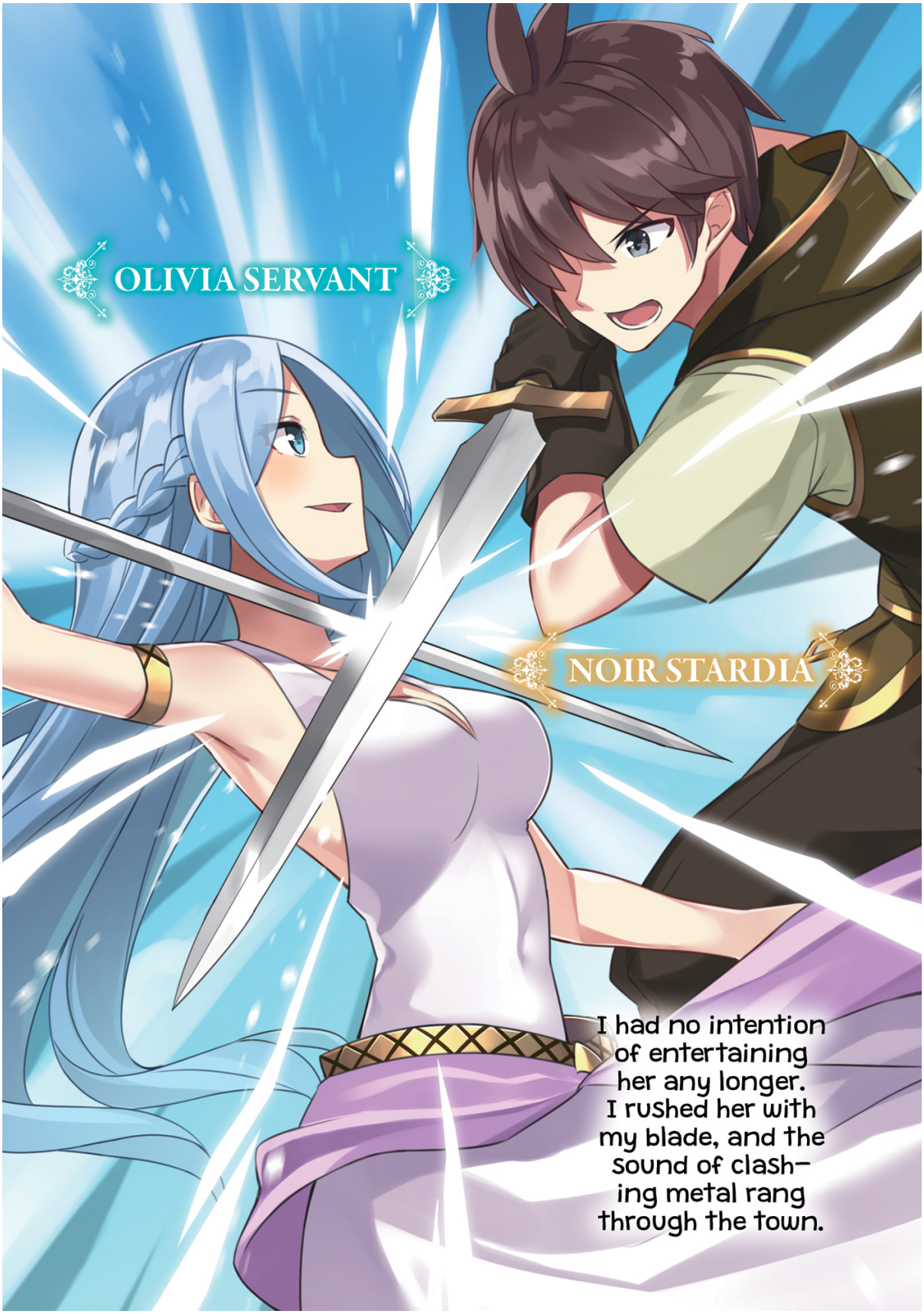

THE
HIDDEN
DUNGEON
ONLY I CAN
ENTER
NOVEL
5
written by
MEGURU SETO
illustrated by
TAKEHANA NOTE

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"Oh, Noir, you're so..."
"Are you sure you're not wasting time there, Mr. Noir? I mean, Emma's not the only one here, you know."
LOLA
EMMA BRIGHTNESS


ALICE STARDIA
"I-I'm so sorry..."
Alice mumbled, flushing bright red and turning away from me.


OLIVIA SERVANT
NOIR STARDIA
I had no intention of entertaining her any longer. I rushed her with my blade, and the sound of clash-ing metal rang through the town.

THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER

NOVEL 5

WRITTEN BY

Meguru Seto

ILLUSTRATED BY

Takehana Note

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

THE HIDDEN DUNGEON ONLY I CAN ENTER VOL. 5
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Chapter 1:
Staying Behind

DURING OUR SUMMER VACATION, my friends and I visited the town of Honest in the neighboring kingdom of Rosette. We were there to visit my older brother, but Honest was no ordinary town. In fact, it had been cursed by Gaien, its former hero—who had installed a stone in the center of town to attract monsters. Fortunately, we were able to destroy the stone and save the town from the latest attack. Because of that, we were invited to Rosette's capital to be recognized by the king himself for our efforts.

Unfortunately, summer vacation was already over and we knew with absolute certainty that Ms. Elena, our homeroom teacher, would be very upset if we were late getting back. But it wasn't like we could turn down a king. So, with that hanging over our heads, we took a carriage to the capital. At least there was never a dull moment, as Emma, Luna, Leila, and Lola were with me.

"Mr. Stardia, we have arrived at the capital," the coachman called back to us.

We climbed out of the carriage and looked around at the city.

"Wow," I said. "It's huge!"

"I know, right?" said Emma. "I feel kinda nervous."

"Really?" I asked. "You don't normally get nervous, Emma."

"Of course I do!" she protested. "I always get nervous. I'm as delicate as a flower!"

I was pretty sure she was playing a little fast and loose with the truth, but I didn't argue back. Instead, we walked through the city gates and were swallowed by the crowd.

"This place is really bustling," Lola said.

"Indeed," Luna agreed. "But then, it is the capital."

They seemed excited as we headed into the city, peering into shop windows. There were a lot of clothing stores here, and they weren't all

armor shops either. Many sold fashionable women’s styles.

“Noir, would you like to come pick out clothes for me?” Lola said, grabbing my arm.

It really was more of a statement of intent than a question. She dragged me toward a shop, but Emma seized my other arm.

“Hey! I want Noir to pick out *my* clothes too!”



“Is there even anything you can wear here?” Lola asked. “Won’t that chest of yours just burst out of everything?”

“Rude! As if you’re one to talk. Your outfit doesn’t even have a back. It’s perverted!”

“It’s not perverted,” Lola protested. “It’s sexy!”

The two of them got into fights like this all the time, but this one seemed more like they were just blowing off steam. They even looked strangely relieved when they finished bickering. That said, I didn’t want to cause a scene in the middle of town, so we all headed toward the shop together. However, before we could reach it, Luna called out behind us.

“Watch out! You’re going to run into—”

“Huh?”

Lola bumped into an older woman who was walking behind us. I quickly pulled Lola away to avoid a total disaster, and we both bowed our heads in apology. That sort of thing was probably unavoidable when the city was so crowded.

“Guys,” Leila said, grimacing, “I’m going after her.”

Leila? But before I could ask her what was happening, both she and the older woman took off running. I had no choice but to go after them.

Leila was the most physically fit of all of us, so there was no way a mere housewife could outrun her—or at least, there shouldn’t have been a way! But this woman was shockingly fast.

Just not fast enough to evade Leila’s grasp.

“You stole her wallet, didn’t you?” Leila demanded. “Hand it over.”

“Excuse me?!” the woman protested. “I’ve done no such thing!”

“Don’t play dumb. I saw you take it!” Leila shoved her hand into the woman’s purse. When she took it back out again, she held Lola’s wallet.

“I think that belongs to me!” Lola took it from Leila’s hand.

“She snatched it when you ‘ran into’ her,” Leila explained.

The thief couldn’t say a thing. The evidence was indisputable. Instead, the woman pulled a pair of daggers from her skirts, twirling them

around her fingers. Leila took a step back, pulling Luna and Lola out of the way.

“I think that’s my cue!” Emma jumped into the fray. After all, she knew a thing or two about daggers herself.

As she and the woman exchanged blows, I cleared the area of bystanders to make sure no one got hurt. I thought it wouldn’t take Emma long to deal with this thief, but after a few moments, it became clear that I was way wrong. This woman was going toe-to-toe with her! Emma still had the upper hand, but there was definitely something different about this woman. I used my Discerning Eye on her.

Name: Lanessa Caccaro

Age: 44

Species: Human

Level: 48

Occupation: Unemployed

Skills: Dual Wielding Daggers (Grade C); Stone Bullet

She might have been unemployed, but she was actually pretty strong! I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn she was an adventurer or something.

“Dammit! Why are you so strong, you big-boobed bimbo?!”

“Who are you calling a bimbo?!”

Emma put all her weight into her next blow, knocking one of the woman’s daggers from her hand. After that, the woman didn’t stand a chance. At least, not in a fair fight. She must have realized this, because she pointed her remaining dagger at me. I thought perhaps she was looking for a way out, but the second she extended her arm, I knew what was coming. Sure enough, a moment later she fired off a Stone Bullet. I countered it with one of my own, and of course, mine was several times larger. Once again, the thief found herself outclassed.

“That doesn’t look like a normal Stone Bullet!” she protested.

“Apologies for interrupting your moment of shock.”

I kicked the remaining dagger out of her hand, then grabbed her arm and threw her over my shoulder. She screamed, but I didn’t let that distract me. Once she was on the ground, I restrained her with one of the joint locks Leila had taught me. The woman struggled at first, but before long, she accepted her loss.

“You’re strong, kid!” she said.

“That was so cool!” someone shouted.

A crowd had started to gather around us.

“The guards will be here soon, so it won’t be much longer.”

One of the other passersby broke into spontaneous applause. It was all a little embarrassing. In any case, with Lola’s wallet back where it belonged, all that was left was to find out what this woman had thought she was doing. After all, she was hardly pickpocketing for the cash. Her clothes and her weapons were too well made for that.

“I…just need money,” she said.

“Why don’t you just sell those daggers then?” I asked her.

“If I did that, Master Iesu would…”

But the moment that name crossed her lips, her whole demeanor changed somehow. Her mouth opened wide and she started panting, like she was in pain. I was worried I was holding her too tightly, so I loosened my grip, careful of the fact she could be acting. But almost immediately, her face turned purple and she started to foam at the mouth.

“Noir, get away from her!” Emma shouted.

I jumped back, and it was just as well I did—an ominous purple liquid pooled under her body. Was it some kind of magic? It looked like some kind of poison spell.

Luna rushed to try to help, but it was too late. The light went out of the woman’s eyes and her heart stopped beating. I scanned the area and soon spotted a masked figure standing on a rooftop.

“Up there!” I shouted. “He must be the one responsible!”

But as soon as I'd spoken, the man jumped onto another roof and took off running.

We were still standing there stunned when the guards finally showed up. At least the bystanders were kind enough to explain what had happened, and that we weren't responsible for the woman's death.

"The masked man I saw used some kind of magic to kill her," I said. "He might have even been someone she knew."

I was mumbling, but the guard heard me. His face turned grim at my words, and slowly, he filled me in on what was happening in Rosette.

"He's the leader of a vile insurgent group trying to usurp the throne," the guard explained as we stood over the thief's body. "The Fangs of Wrath. Their leader is called Iesu, and some of the group's members are fanatics."

So this woman was a member of the Fangs of Wrath and had been killed for failing to complete her job. Apparently, the group's "fundraising" activities included everything from pickpocketing to robbery and muggings. Nothing was off the table. The more they disturbed the peace, the better.

"Why are they trying to overthrow the government?" I asked.

"Iesu probably can't stand the fact that he isn't king himself," said the guard. "They've been getting more aggressive lately too. We're having trouble keeping them in check."

Emma leaned over to mutter in my ear. "We really can't catch a break, can we?"

I had to agree—trouble seemed to follow us wherever we went.

"Maybe I'm cursed or something…" Luna said, echoing my own thoughts.

For now, we let the guard deal with the woman's body and headed to the castle. All the same, I had a bad feeling about what would happen next, and my bad feelings tended to be right.

We made our way toward the castle, and when we gave our names to the guards at the gate, they let us in politely.

“Hey, how much do you think this carpet costs?”

“Gotta be something crazy expensive. Like, *way* out of my price range. I bet Emma’s family could afford it, though.”

“Oh, don’t be silly!”

I smiled at their banter as we climbed the stairs to the third floor, where the throne room was located. The moment we reached the top of the stairs, a row of soldiers parted to let us through. I was startled for a moment. Back home, my family were little better than commoners. I wasn’t used to respectful treatment.

The throne stood on the far side of the room, decorated with gold and copious details. The man sitting in it had a profoundly impressive physique—I’m not sure I’d ever seen a *quadruple* chin before. He must have been around forty years old, while the queen sitting beside him was a beautiful blonde woman who didn’t look much older than us. That was some age gap there!

We came up to the throne and knelt before the king, as was proper.

“We are called Gyro,” he said. “Tales of your great deeds in Honest have reached our ears. We commend you.”

“You are far too generous, Your Majesty,” I replied.

“Noir Stardia, we presume? We have heard of your skill and the competence of your companions. Thus, we must solicit your assistance.”

I knew it! My sixth sense was always right about these things. Whatever he was about to ask, I was sure it would have something to do with the Fangs of Wrath. It didn’t take long before I was proven right. As we listened, the king asked us to deal with the Fangs—and to take out Iesu if we could. It sounded like a lot of hassle. All I really wanted to do was go home.

And it wasn’t even just that I *wanted* to. I *had* to go home. I had schoolwork to do, and Lola and Luna both had work-work. It wasn’t like we could just hang around here as long as we wanted.

“I apologize, Your Majesty,” I said. “But we really need to head back.”

But the king wasn’t done yet. “We shall grant you titles if you kill Iesu!”

“That’s nice, but—”

“Very well then, Stardia,” he said. “We shall ask for your assistance and yours alone. And we shall not suffer ‘no’ as an answer.”

He signaled to the burly soldiers near the stairs, and they moved to block off our escape. What exactly was Gyro’s plan here? I couldn’t imagine he was going to execute us if we refused. Then again, judging from what we’d seen of him so far, he didn’t seem like a particularly wise ruler.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll stay behind by myself.”

Emma looked dismayed. “Noir?!”

She was worried about me, but I reassured her that I’d be fine. Although, to be honest, nothing about this was fine. I still had to say something to make her and the others feel better.

“Yes,” said Gyro. “We are most pleased that you’ve chosen to take the mutually beneficial route. You are wiser than your years, Stardia. But before you leave, we wish for the blonde one to stay—she has piqued our interest.”

Why did he want to see Emma alone? I asked, but Gyro insisted that he’d only speak to her directly. I didn’t trust him, but it wasn’t like we had much choice. We headed downstairs to the entrance and waited for Emma.

“Why do you think he wanted to talk to her alone?” Lola asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t think Emma’s family has anything to do with this kingdom, but maybe it could be diplomatic?”

Leila frowned. “I’ll ask around.”

She spent the next few minutes talking to several of the maids who were cleaning the palace’s elaborate furnishings. When she came back, she looked concerned.

“They said that this King Gyro guy is a sucker for curvy blonde women,” she said. “Apparently, he has eight mistresses, and they’re all

blonde.”

“I’ll be right back!” I shouted.

Almost before the words were out of my mouth, I was racing back up those stairs. I knew that bastard was going to try to coerce Emma into becoming mistress number nine.

This time, when I reached the line of soldiers on the third floor, they stood firm, blocking my way. Behind the door, I could hear the king shouting angrily in the throne room.

“You dare make a mockery of us?! However friendly you may be with Stardia, we shall not suffer such mistreatment!”

Was he actually trying to threaten her?

“Get out of the way, please,” I told the soldiers.

But they just shook their heads.

“We’ve been ordered not to allow anyone inside. Even with everything you have done, Mr. Stardia, you must wait here. If you attempt to force your way through, we shall have no choice but to take serious action.”

They meant it too. They even drew their swords. I’d wanted to resolve this without causing any more trouble, but by now I was pissed.

I fired a foot-wide Stone Bullet at their feet, knocking a number of them over and clearing a path to the door.

“Ow!”

“Ouch!”

“Ugh.”

“What?!”

While the soldiers clutched at their injured feet, I leaped over them—the sound of their shouts echoing behind me as I burst into the throne room and raced to Emma’s side.

“Noir?!” she said. “What are you doing here?!”

“He’s trying to convince you to become another one of his mistresses, isn’t he?” I said. “And he was yelling at you because you said no, right?”

Emma blinked at me. “Right! That’s *exactly* what happened!”

I smirked, but now wasn’t really the time to be smug. If nothing else, we were surrounded by irate soldiers. This was going to get messy.

King Gyro was beetroot-red with rage. I wondered if name-dropping Duke Schoen and General Stey might help, but I soon dismissed the idea. After all, Gyro was a king. He outranked both of our allies.

“Even if we both end up wanted criminals and on the lam,” Emma said, “I won’t mind at all as long as I’m with you, Noir.”

“Wanted criminals within hours of reaching the capital, huh?” I said. “That sounds like fun.”

“Fun?! I thought you would say the opposite.”

“Exactly!” I shouted, almost in tears.

The king’s shouting grew louder and louder as he struggled with his meager vocabulary to find new ways to insult us.

We put our lives on the line to save Honest and this is the treatment we get?

“King Gyro,” I said. “You can say what you will, but know that I possess abilities that will allow me to strike you ill without so much as lifting a finger.”

“S-surely you jest?!” Gyro spluttered. “We will not be deceived!”

“Your funeral, buddy.”

I was within range and I had plenty of LP, so I could Bestow a skill on him if I needed to. Maybe Feeble would work? No, it needed to be something obvious. Emma stepped in front of me, gripping her daggers. The king realized we were serious, because his tone immediately became more pleading.

“Wait! Let us be civil!”

“We’ll think about it,” I said. “*If* you accept Emma’s decision and forgive us for our actions in this incident.”

“Well,” said Gyro. “Forgiving *all* of your impertinence may not be possible…”

“We are from a neighboring kingdom, and *you* are not our king. You have tried to take Emma against her will,” I said, drawing my sword with a flourish. “We are simply defending ourselves.”

I was getting desperate, but I would fight if I had to.

According to my Discerning Eye, the soldiers around us varied quite a lot in strength and ability. Still, if I targeted their weak spots, I was confident that Emma could get away, at least.

“Noir!” Emma cried. “Are you really going to use *that* sword? It makes people sick with a single touch!”

It took me a moment to see her angle, but when I did, I played right along.

“What choice do I have?” I said. “You know my plague sword is *so* effective. Ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

I brandished the sword and cackled for good measure. Glancing over my shoulder, the soldiers were backing away. I could hardly blame them. I mean, who wanted to end up on the end of a plague sword?

The king realized he was losing his men and, at length, swallowed his pride. “Very well,” he said. “We shall…overlook *all* of your many offenses. Sheathe your blade, sir.”

He signaled the soldiers to back off, and I obliged by putting my sword away. I kept my hand on the hilt just in case.

But the problem was solved for now, right?

Maybe not. The atmosphere in the throne room remained tense. I really didn’t want to be there. For one, I didn’t want to put Emma and the others at risk, but I was also sick of being such a bottom-rung aristocrat and having to grovel to everyone all the time. *Thanks a ton, Dad!*

At least what Gyro wanted was simple: Justice brought to the Fangs of Wrath, to repay them for all the troubles they’d caused the town and their attempts to seize the castle. Of course, this included their leader, Iesu. King

Gyro had no qualms about flat-out asking me to assassinate the guy. It seemed Iesu was resourceful and charismatic enough to be a real threat.

“Those cretins have been using assassins not even ten years of age,” said the king. “We must destroy them by any means necessary !”

Wow, this guy really did not have a filter. I was glad he wasn’t *my* king.

“That’s easier said than done,” I replied. “This is a big risk for me. I mean, you guys haven’t been able to deal with the Fangs yourselves, so what do you expect an outsider like me to do?”

“Hrmph…”

Gyro had pissed me off, so I had to get that jab in. Then again, he was a king, so it was best to leave it at that.

Regardless, there was no way I was going to assassinate someone just on Gyro’s say-so. Instead, we settled for me assisting in his capture. Once we’d been briefed about the Fangs of Wrath, we headed out of the castle to join the others.

Emma clung to my arm the whole way. Seemed she was pleased that I’d stepped in to defend her honor. Also, having her body pressed against mine earned me some LP on the way down the stairs, so I couldn’t complain.

We headed straight to the town gates so I could say goodbye to the others. Of course, they all wanted to stay and help, but I wouldn’t allow it. They all really needed to get home.

“Promise me you’ll run away if things get too dangerous?” Emma said, almost tearful. “I swear, if you don’t come back, I’ll punch you so hard, you’ll never forget it!”

I had to admit that she was kind of cute when she got like this.

I stood and watched their carriage pull away, then returned to town to gather information. What Gyro had told me wasn’t exactly useful. With so few leads to work with, it sounded like this Iesu was a slippery fellow. Even so, everyone in town had heard of him. With every story I heard, he sounded a little more terrifying. This guy had handed adventurers their own asses and fought elite soldiers who hadn’t been able to lay a finger on him.

Um, you folks realize I need to fight this guy, right? Couldn't you give me a happier version of these stories?

Apparently, there were even a number of local factions that supported the Fangs. It didn't take me long to find an old man who sympathized with them.

"I mean, sure," he said, "the Fangs are pretty radical, but they want to kill the king and end the monarchy. As far as goals go, well…"

I got similar stories from a bunch of people. In private, it seemed a lot of folks would be pleased if Gyro was killed.

That made me kinda curious, so I started asking about why people had such bad feelings toward the monarchy. It didn't take long before I started wishing that I hadn't asked. Apparently, the nobility in this country often abused their powers. The worst of it was something called "Noble Fight Club" where poor commoners were used for sport. Of course, it was only a "game" to the nobles involved. Just the thought of it made me sick.

Maybe I'd be better off heading home. Almost as soon as that thought popped into my head, I found myself walking back toward the city gates.

"No!" I said for the benefit of the man who was following me, who I assumed was one of Gyro's subordinates. "I have to keep trying! I'm gonna get this guy, no matter what it takes."

Was that the right amount of enthusiasm? Who could tell?

Either way, I turned to the Great Sage for help: *Is a man named Iesu, or someone operating under that name, to be found in this town?*

<There is one approximately 256 yards south-southeast, and another approximately 439 yards north-northeast.>

I'd narrowed it down to two already? That was good going!

I followed up by asking the Great Sage for any particular physical characteristics for these two individuals. Apparently, they were both young men. One was slender with long brown hair and a prominent mole on the back of his neck. The other had short, ash-gray hair and a scar on his right elbow.

That was enough questions for now. I did have some immunity to the Great-Sage-induced headaches, thanks to my skill, but it wasn't perfect, and

Emma wasn’t here to kiss it better if I got reduced to tears by some massive migraine.

Instead, I started with the man who was closest, using my steps to measure the distance until I ended up in a park.

“A slender brown-haired man with a mole…” I mumbled to myself.

I glanced at everyone I passed, but they all looked normal. *Completely* normal, in fact. Then I noticed someone lying on a bench and smoking a cigar. I approached slowly, planning to use my Discerning Eye to determine his identity. It wouldn’t work if he had a Conceal skill, but it was worth a shot. But before I had a chance to activate the skill, the man locked eyes with me.

“Hey, kid.”

“Huh? Wh-who, me?”

He had a deep, commanding voice. It startled me.

“You ain’t from around here, are you, kid?” he asked.

“No, I’m not. I actually just got here. I’m sightseeing.”

“Now that’s hilarious,” he said, getting to his feet.

Before I could stop him, he reached out and covered my eyes with his hand. I panicked and reached for my sword. Had he seen through me already?

“Now, now,” said the man. “Don’t be hasty. I just wanna hear about this place you’re from.”

He drew his hand back and showed me the mosquito he’d caught between his fingers. He crushed it and smiled at me.

Oh, I see. Maybe he’s not a bad guy after all?

He did have a mole on his neck, so he had to be the guy I was looking for. I thanked him for saving me from the bug bite and quickly used Discerning Eye.

Name: Joss Trovia

Age: 24

Species: Human

Level: 69

Occupation: Explorer

Skills: Swordsmanship (Grade A); Stone Bullet; Improved Tackle

He was stronger than I'd expected. I was still much more skilled, but that A-Grade Swordsmanship skill was impressive. Since his only occupation was "explorer," he probably wasn't the Iesu I was looking for. Although would Iesu's ambitions even show up in occupation field? Pseudonyms didn't appear, after all.

"I was thinkin' it was about time I get exploring again, so I wanna hear about where you're from," he said.

"I'd love to chat, but I'm a little busy right now."

"Then promise me you'll tell me about it next time we meet, kid."

I nodded and made a swift retreat, heading toward the other potential Iesu. It was just gut instinct, but I was fairly certain the man in the park wasn't the one I was looking for. He didn't seem particularly on guard… just like he wanted to talk. I didn't want to jump to conclusions, but it was time to find the second man.

I backtracked to where I'd begun, then headed north-northeast until I found myself in a city square. The place was full of street performers using their skills and sleight of hand to entertain their audience. There was a big stone stairway nearby where people from all walks of life sat to watch. The square brimmed with a comfortable, laid-back atmosphere. It was a shame that Emma and the others couldn't stay to see it.

Bringing myself back to the task at hand, I searched for the ashen-haired man until one of the performers—a man with a face painted white and a bright red nose—beckoned me over. He handed a bunch of beanbags to me.

"Uh-hoo!" he cried in a strange voice. "Why don'cha give those a throw, buddy boy?"

“I’m not your buddy, and I’m definitely not a little boy—I’m sixteen!”

“All the same,” said the man. “I’m sure we can surprise even someone as self-assured as you!”

No way in hell am I gonna be surprised, I thought as I tossed the beanbags like he’d asked.

The performer caught them one after another, then held his hands up for everyone to see. The beanbags had vanished. The crowd was delighted.

I squinted at where the bags had been and used Discerning Eye. Just as I suspected, he had C-Grade Pocket Dimension. He must have been making a pocket just in front of his hand and stowing them away before anyone could notice. It was impressive, but more than anything, I wanted to wipe the smug look off his face. He held up his hands again and the beanbags had returned. The audience was amazed.

“I can do that too,” I said. “Throw them at me.”

“Hm? It’s not easy.”

“Trust me.”

He looked dubious—then he threw them at me all at once.

Hey! I meant one at a time!

I somehow managed to get them all stowed away, although I was pretty sure the audience saw exactly how I did it. For his part, the white-faced man looked confused.

“That’s a rare skill,” I told him. “I’d never considered using it like that. Thanks for the inspiration!”

However talented someone was with their skill, it was the user that made a skill worth it. A brilliant, creative person could use any skill to turn the tables in their favor, but the opposite was also true. An average person would only ever get average results. That’s why it was important to remain focused and not get too big-headed—wait, I didn’t have time for this philosophizing! I had something important to do!

I went back to looking for the ashen-haired man. He had to be around here somewhere, but before I could find him, my attention was drawn by a

fight on the other side of the square. One of the other performers was arguing with a gray-haired man. Could he be the one I was looking for?

As I hurried over, I listened to what they were saying. From what I could gather, the portly performer had misjudged his fire-breathing act and sprayed fire all over the other man's clothes. Even though it had been put out right away, the gray-haired man was furious, and now the performer was getting mad too.

I was firmly on the spectator's side, though—the performer had made a mistake and just needed to apologize. Surely it wasn't that hard! I don't know, maybe it was more difficult for adults. They had too much pride in the way. I hoped I didn't end up like that when I grew up. As I mulled over that, the fight developed into a real brawl.

"Eeek!"

The gray-haired man drew a sword, and the crowd scattered as the two of them faced off. The performer made the first move. He took a swig of alcohol and blew a plume of fire, large enough to engulf a whole person. Wasn't that a bit much? Even if his opponent was armed, it seemed like overkill. Yet when the flames dissipated, no one stood where they had been. What was happening?

"Huh?"

The performer was just as confused as I was, but a moment later, his face went white as a sheet. The point of a sword pressed firmly against his back. When had the gray-haired man gotten behind him?

"You've got two choices: You either die, or I beat the hell out of you. Choose."

"What if I say neither?" the performer asked.

"Then I wish you the best of luck in the afterlife."

"Stop! You can punch me once, okay?! Just don't kill me, please!"

After that, the performer was beaten to a pulp. Despite the fire-breather's pleas, the gray-haired man didn't stop after one hit. I counted twelve before I had to close my eyes, shutting out the sight of the performer's swollen face.

When the swordsman was finally satisfied, he turned to leave. I was just about to follow him when something stopped me dead in my tracks. Another person emerged from the crowd to quietly follow the swordsman. His hair was gray as ash as well.

How many of these guys could there be?!

Chapter 2:
The Man Named Iesu

THE ASHEN-HAIRED MAN tailed the swordsman out of the square, and I carefully followed them both. Either could have been the man I was looking for.

The swordsman headed into a squalid commercial area. I assumed he was going to go into a bar, but instead he took a turn down a narrow side alley, and the other ashen-haired man followed. I turned the corner to see the two of them confront each other and swiftly hid myself in the shadows. I could just barely pick up on their conversation. The ashen-haired man asked the swordsman to do something, and the swordsman loudly turned him down. By the looks of it, the swordsman knew he'd been followed and had accepted the possibility of a fight.

If it looked as though I was at risk of getting dragged into it, I'd have to run. But not a few moments later, the ashen-haired man just turned around and walked out of the alley as though nothing had happened. More shockingly, the swordsman turned to follow with a vacant look in his eyes.

What was going on here? The swordsman had been too angry to give in so quickly. I had to get closer. I needed to find out what was happening.

First, I used my Discerning Eye on the swordsman. He was strong, as I'd expected, but he didn't have any notable skills. Apparently, he was employed by a general store. So the real question was: Who was the other man?

Name: Iesu Michalder

Age: 25

Species: Human

Level: 102

Occupation: Butcher; Revolutionary

Skills: Brainwashing; Uninhibited

Oh, this was *definitely* the right guy! I mean, you couldn't get more suspicious than "revolutionary," and I was pretty sure that killing a king would count as revolution. Even so, I was starting to think Gyro was a bit of a tyrant. Would it really be such a bad thing if he died?

Either way, the ashen-haired man sure was strong. My level was higher than his, but he was plenty powerful for someone who didn't have my particular skills. Besides, it wasn't like the person with the highest level always won. If that were true, I would have died a hundred times over in the hidden dungeon.

However, the scariest thing about Iesu was his skills. After what I'd seen happen to the swordsman, I had kind of anticipated something like Brainwashing. I was using Editor to look into his Uninhibited skill when he turned around abruptly to face me.

My heart leaped into my throat, and I hastily slipped into an alleyway. Luckily, it opened onto a busy street, so I didn't think he saw me. All the same, it was better to be safe, so I pretended to be a regular civilian and walked into a nearby inn. I wouldn't be able to overuse the Great Sage, but I could always ask him to find Iesu again. Right now, it was more important to protect my identity.

I waited just inside the inn door for a few moments, but neither Iesu nor the swordsman seemed to be following me. I let out a sigh of relief. I'd thought I was dead for sure. I was a coward, and there was nothing more terrifying than an enemy I knew nothing about. No matter how strong I got or how many skills I accumulated, I didn't think that would ever change.

"Are you okay?" asked a girl. "You look like you just saw a dragon."

She was staring at me, so I supposed my face must have looked pretty dumb. She was taller than me and gorgeous, with freckles and red hair that made her stand out from everyone else in the room.

"Oh, I'm fine," I said. "I'd like a room for the night."

"Well, we do technically have some vacancies, but I'm not so sure you'll sleep too well tonight."

Apparently there was some kind of meeting going on in the first-floor dining area tonight.

“What’s it for?” I asked.

The girl looked startled. “It’s a Fangs of Wrath hunting party, and some of those guys get quite unruly. Might make it difficult to sleep, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t mind,” I said. “Actually, I’m kinda curious about them. I’m new in town. Getting to know some interesting and dangerous folks sounds like fun.”

If I could charm my way into the party, maybe I could find out something interesting about Iesu, but the girl’s face darkened instead. I thought she was about to tell me to get lost, but in the next moment, she smiled and led me to my room.

“My name’s Nina, by the way,” she said. “Nice to meet you.”

I returned pleasantries and dropped my bags off in the room. There, I took a little breather, then headed down for dinner. The inn seemed more like a little mom-and-pop shop, but the food was surprisingly delicious. As I ate, I considered how to deal with the group meeting this evening.

First, I spent 300 LP to acquire the skill Tail, which would make it harder for anyone I was following to notice me. Now I’d know intuitively how close I could get without being seen, though it wasn’t foolproof. I still needed to be careful, and I would need to figure out how to earn more LP soon.

I had about 2,000 LP left, which sounded like a lot in theory, but I doubted it would be enough. Ideally, I’d have at least five or ten thousand before facing Iesu, but without Emma and the others around to help me earn it, that was going to be tricky.

Well, I had a little time before the hunting party, so I decided to explore the town a little. It was dark by now, and somehow a red-light district had manifested in the middle of town, seemingly out of nowhere. As I walked through it, one of the young women called out to me.

“Oh, aren’t we cute. Lookin’ for some fun, honeybun?”

“What kind of fun are you selling?” I asked.

“The exotic dance variety. I’ll give you a front row seat—my treat.”

So the *sexy* kind of exotic dance, right? That would be fine, wouldn’t it? It wouldn’t cross any lines, and my chastity would be preserved, so I followed the woman in. I stayed on guard to protect my innocence, but according to Discerning Eye, she didn’t have any skills I needed to worry about, at least.

There were several large tables inside, but most of the customers were standing up—swarming around the dancers on the stage. Magical spotlights hung from the ceiling, shining straight through the dancers’ scanty clothes as they undulated, opening and closing their legs provocatively.

“C’mere, babe.”

The girl from outside took my arm and led me to the front row. The atmosphere in here was so thick that it was hard to catch my breath.

“It’s this kid’s first time in a place like this,” she told some of the other dancers. “So treat him *extra* nice, okay?”

“Wait,” I said. “What?”

But before I had the chance to argue, the dancers pulled me up onto the stage and surrounded me. There were five or six of them, pressing in on every side and touching me all over. The woman from outside even took my hands and started moving them over their bodies too!

The audience shouted and swelled with jealousy, but the dancers didn’t seem to care. It was almost ten minutes later before I was finally returned to the audience, feeling like used goods but 500 LP better off.

“Touch me too!” shouted one of the other men.

Suddenly, the whole place felt terrifying. However, the dancers were on a break now. For a moment, I couldn’t figure out why they were still out here and not in their dressing rooms. They looked like they were waiting for something. After a second, I realized what it was: large sums of money. The men swarmed around the woman who’d brought me in, taking cash out of their pockets and negotiating prices.

One of the dancers looked me up and down.

“I’d let the kid have me for 1 percent the going rate,” she said.

I guess she'd taken a liking to me. For that rate, it might as well be free.

"What do you say?" asked the woman who'd brought me in. "I can find you a cheap place to spend the night."

"Oh, no, I'm not interested in that."

"Really?"

"I want my first time to be special!" I said firmly. "Bye!"

Before they could argue, I dashed back out into the street where the embarrassment promptly hit me like a stampeding dragon. I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. Considering I'd gone in there in the first place, the claim that I wasn't at all tempted would hardly stand up to scrutiny. Even worse, every attempt I'd made to play it cool had failed miserably. I was weak at the knees!

All the same, the city was kind of scary at night, so I hurried back to the inn. As I turned the corner, I saw a bunch of burly men already heading inside. They must have been the hunting party.

I headed to the first floor and found Nina waiting for me with her hands on her hips. She looked intimidating, and the atmosphere was completely different from when I'd first walked in that afternoon. After I stepped inside, Nina closed the door behind me and locked it. They really didn't want anyone to hear what they were about to discuss.

"Glad to see everyone here," said Nina. "Noir will also be joining us tonight."

"I haven't seen that guy before," said one of the men. "Who is he?"

He had sharp eyes, and he was staring directly at me. The threatening tone in his voice worried me too. I mean, I was locked in a room with thirty people and, from what I could gather with my Discerning Eye, they were all fairly strong.

"Most of the people here have been wronged by Iesu and the Fangs of Wrath," Nina explained, ignoring the man's complaints. "So we meet up every once in a while to exchange information about him."

To me, that meant Iesu might know about their meetings too. No wonder they were suspicious.

Almost right on cue, the biggest and brawniest of the group closed in on me and put me in a headlock. “How do we know you’re not a spy?”

“Now, now,” said Nina. “There’s no need for violence.”

“What else do you suggest we do?” the man asked.

“Just have Poporozzi question him.”

As the brawny guy let go of me, a slim man in a top hat stepped forward and set out two chairs. He sat in one of them and motioned for me to sit in the other. I didn’t have much choice but to do as he said, but I used Discerning Eye on him as I obeyed.

Name: Poporozzi Chirozzi

Age: 38

Species: Human

Level: 12

Occupation: Storyteller; Conversationalist

Skills: Lie Detector

I’d never seen that particular skill before, but I guess that explained it. I’d have to be careful with what I said now. If I tried to stretch the truth, this guy would see right through me.

“Do you have any relation to Iesu?” he asked.

“I’ve never met him directly,” I said. “But I did see him earlier today.”

I figured it was best to be upfront about it. After all, even if it wasn’t for the human lie detector here, these guys were Iesu’s enemies. If I could make friends with them, maybe I’d get some useful information.

Either way, my answer caused quite the stir. Apparently, I was the only person who’d actually seen Iesu’s face. I gave them a rough physical description and described his unique skills, but none of them had heard of that Uninhibited skill either. It seemed it was extremely rare. There had to be some kind of explanation there.

Once they were sure I wasn’t lying, the hunting party welcomed me into the fold. They all had their own reasons for hating Iesu and the Fangs. Some had been robbed, others had been injured in incidents Iesu caused.

“We call ourselves the Shields of Righteousness,” said Nina. “And I’m their leader. Sorry for not saying something sooner, Noir.”

She wasn’t much older than me, but she’d managed to earn the trust of all the people here. Frankly, I was impressed.

“You better watch out, Noir,” warned one of the men. “She turns into an ogre when she’s mad.”

“What do you mean, ‘turns into’?” another asked. “Can’t turn into something you already are!”

“And she’s got the mind of someone over twice her age,” a third added.

“I think I’m gonna have to have a little *talk* with you lot after this meeting,” Nina said pointedly.

Immediately, the joking stopped and the room fell silent. They really weren’t kidding about not wanting to piss her off!

All in all, they were an impressive bunch, and they had some decent information on the Fangs. Much more than I’d gotten out of the king’s men, at least! According to these guys, the Fangs had a ton of wanted criminals in their ranks, and all of them were completely devoted to Iesu. Even if they were captured and tortured, they’d bite off their tongues or kill themselves before they gave anything away.

“I always thought Iesu had some kind of special ability,” Nina said. “If what Noir says is true, it all makes sense. I wonder if there’s anything we can do or use to protect ourselves against his Brainwashing.”

Poporozzi had broad knowledge of various skills and abilities, so he soon stepped forward to explain the effects of Brainwashing. Apparently, when the skill was deployed, the target became enthralled by the sound of the user’s voice. Eye and physical contact accelerated the results. The skill was often ineffective against someone of a much higher level than the user, but ultimately it depended more on an individual’s character and the

specifics of the situation. If you were weak-willed or easily swayed, you were in trouble either way.

Wait, had I just described myself?!

Thankfully, there were skills that could counter it. High-Grade Abnormal Status Effect Immunity was an effective defense, and even C-Grade Mental Status Effect Immunity made it much harder for Brainwashing to work. I investigated and found it would only cost me 400 LP, so that was kind of a no-brainer. My level was quite a bit higher than Iesu's, so I probably would have been fine anyway, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Despite his in-depth knowledge of skills, even Poporozzi didn't know anything about Uninhibited. I supposed I'd just have to investigate it myself the next time I ran into Iesu.

For now, I decided it would be a good idea to covertly examine everyone in the Shields of Righteousness. Ultimately, none of them were outstandingly powerful, although they were all above average. The one thing that surprised me was that their leader was the weakest of them all.

Name: Nina Able

Age: 18

Species: Human-Ogre

Occupation: Inn Employee

Skills: Ogre Transformation

Strange that her position as group leader didn't register under her occupations. Maybe that was because it wasn't something she profited from. Even more curious was her species. Was she a human *and* an ogre? Judging from her skill, she could at least transform into one. I used Editor to investigate it further, and yup, that's exactly what it was. The guys hadn't been joking when they said she turned into an ogre when she was mad. The transformation drastically increased her combat abilities too.

I'd learned at school how strong ogres could be; even their children could defeat a human adventurer. I didn't want to think about how terrifying Nina would be if she transformed. I'd have to try even harder than normal to get along with her!

The next thing on my to-do list was to earn some more LP in preparation for fighting Iesu. With that in mind, I spent the next day looking for restaurants that served unusual foods, and at night I headed into some of the tamer establishments in the red-light district.

I had plenty of money, so this seemed like the best way to go about it, but I still felt a little weird. I did need the LP though, so I didn't really have a choice.

The other thing I needed to do was figure out Iesu's routine without raising any suspicions. I started off by identifying his current location with the Great Sage. Without Emma around, I had to be careful with how much I used it, but this time, it paid off.

Iesu had a small butcher's shop on the border between the commercial district and the aristocratic quarter. It didn't take me long to find a place nearby to hide and observe him. I could see him through the window of his shop, wearing an apron and engaging warmly with his customers. He hardly seemed like the same person I'd encountered yesterday. Even his expression was different, and the shop appeared to be thriving.

"Move it!"

As I watched, three soldiers forced their way into the line. From the look of their armor, they were castle guards. As they pushed their way to the front of the line, the people around them muttered and glanced at each other, but this only made the soldiers angrier.

"What the hell are you all lookin' at?" one of them demanded. "Who do you think keeps this city safe? And this is how you repay us?! Answer me, weakling scum!"

Wow…

How could anyone be so far up their own butts? Even the worst nobles I'd met had some shred of humanity left. Worse, the townspeople seemed used to this kind of treatment and meekly got out of the way.

"Hey, Michalder. Gimme the usual."

"Yes, sir…"

Iesu packed a container full of meat and handed it over. It seemed like a lot, but the soldiers only gave him a paltry sum in return.

"This is barely half the cost…" Iesu said.

"Then give it to me for half-price."

"I can't survive like this!"

Iesu's complaint seemed justified to me but, unbelievably, the soldiers responded by dragging him out of his shop and beating him to a pulp. A crowd formed around them, but no one stepped in to help.

I was just as guilty as the rest of them, watching from a safe distance.

Despite his powerful abilities, Iesu didn't put up a fight. Feigning weakness to protect his identity, huh?

"Isn't this a little extreme?" I muttered.

The old man beside me shook his head. "They always do this kind of thing," he said. "You don't seem like you're from around here. You a traveler?"

"I am," I said. "Are all the soldiers in the city like this?"

"They sure are, but the king and nobles are no better. And the soldiers who serve the king think they're above the law."

I encouraged him to keep talking, and I soon learned that the city was more or less under authoritarian rule. Apparently, when Gyro took the throne, he'd increased taxes aggressively, driving a vast number of his people into poverty.

I thought about how he'd treated me and my friends, even when we were invited to the palace as honored guests for our service to the kingdom. I couldn't imagine how much worse it had to be for the common folk who

lived here. Most people in the city seemed to think that Gyro would go down in history as the greatest buffoon ever to take the throne, and I couldn't say I disagreed with them.

"Poor Michalder," said the old man. "He lost his sister to the nobles' sick games too."

Were these games the ones I'd heard of earlier?

"Games?" I asked.

But the old man just shook his head. "I can't say more than that, and you shouldn't ask about it either. You're a tourist. Enjoy the city—and leave."

With that chilly warning settling over me, the old man wandered off. It looked like the soldiers were almost done assaulting Iesu, and the crowd thinned out. A few people stayed behind to tend his wounds, and for a moment, I felt a pang of sympathy for him.

No. This man was my enemy. I needed to remember that.

I left the area and headed for a nearby pub to gather more information. It was crowded with people having lunch, and I headed over to a group of middle-aged adventurers.

"You wouldn't happen to know anyone well versed in the city's current circumstances, would you?" I asked.

They looked at me dubiously. After a moment, one of them responded.

"I do. Why do you want them?"

"I'm new here, and I need to ask some questions. If I gave you this, could you point me in the right direction? Let me know who to ask?"

I handed over enough for a few cheap drinks, and the man nodded, jerking his chin toward the pub's owner.

"He knows everything," he said. "He used to be in the kingdom's intelligence agency, but he quit to run this place."

"Thank you very much."

I wanted to approach the owner right away, but the place was still so busy that I decided to wait. There was a good chance he wouldn't thank me

for interrupting him during lunch service.

In the end, I waited for almost an hour—until the seats began to empty and everyone left. I approached the owner cautiously. He was a somber-looking man in his late forties with a beard and slicked-back hair.

“I have some questions for you,” I said. “Do you know anything about Michalder’s sister? I’m prepared to pay for whatever you can tell me.”

In the end, he was quick enough to agree to it. What I really wanted to know about was this “game” the nobles played. The one that had led to the death of Iesu’s sister. The owner nodded and led me to the back of the shop. Seemed this wasn’t something he wanted to talk about in public.

We stopped near the trash cans and he lit a cigar. Wasn’t that a little dangerous? I mean, he could start a fire! But he just asked for payment to the tune of about what it cost me to stay a night at a decent inn. Fair enough.

“So there’s this thing they call Noble Fight Club,” he explained. “There, the royals and aristocrats do battle with their ‘pets.’ The winner gets some kind of prize. If you’re sharp, you probably already picked up on this, but their ‘pets’ are people.”

More specifically, they were commoners without any combat skills—mostly women, the elderly, and children. They only made exceptions for younger men if they were seriously ill. These people were forced to fight and kill each other during the event, which happened twice a year.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “That’s…awful.”

“I used to feel the same way,” said the man. “But after a while, you get numb to that sort of thing. It’s just the way things are. The only way to survive is to protect your own tail.”

I fell silent. That couldn’t be the answer. I’d rather die than live like that—than watch someone I loved get hauled away to fight and die in some stupid game without lifting a finger to help them. All of a sudden, I didn’t have to work so hard to imagine what had happened to Iesu’s sister.

“So Michalder didn’t try to save her?”

“What was he going to do? She was just taken. The guards did it. That’s why I don’t work for them anymore.”

There was only one winner in Noble Fight Club and, if they were lucky, they would be exiled from the kingdom. If they were unlucky, they’d be made a slave. And the losers, of course, were all long dead by then. Typically, their corpses were dumped outside the city walls.

The whole existence of this game was meant to be a secret, but the nobles were so sloppy about it that a wide swath of the population knew. All I could think was…what if someone had taken my sister like that? What if someone used Alice as their pet?

“What about justice?” I choked out.

The owner shrugged. “There ain’t no justice, kid. Everything that lives just has to keep fighting to stay that way, every day. Listen, I know you’re curious, but don’t go asking any more questions about this, okay? Nothing good will come of it.”

He understood enough about the game to know what he was talking about, and his warning carried some serious weight. He didn’t seem like a bad person. I mean, that was why he’d quit the guard, right? But the whole conversation put me in a dark mood. If I wasn’t careful, I would end up wallowing.

Instead, I paid him and asked after any local restaurants that served unusual cuisine. He told me about two places, so I headed straight for the closest one and ordered myself some seafood. Shortly afterward, some kind of fermented herring dish arrived.

“It stinks!”

I knew that wasn’t polite, but I couldn’t help myself! The smell was *bad*. Even the waiter must have thought so, because he put the plate down and bolted. Even the nearby diners started to move away to other tables.

“Is this actually edible?” I shouted across the room.

The waiter waved his arms to indicate that, in fact, it was.

“But it smells like ass!” I complained.

The waiter just repeated the signal. Was I losing my mind here? The things I had to do for LP!

I took the tiniest piece of it and timidly brought it to my mouth, wondering if I was offending the fish gods. Surely they couldn't be okay with this!

"Disguuuusting!"

The tiny piece flew out of my mouth with such force it landed right in the waiter's face on the other side of the room. He collapsed to the floor without making a sound.

Sorry about that, friend!

After that, I ran out of the restaurant as fast as I could. Not only did they want more money for the trouble I'd caused, I didn't even earn any LP from the ordeal. Today was getting worse and worse.

I held back my tears long enough to find the second place the owner had recommended to me. This once sold fast food as well as a bunch of other goods. I ordered some lizard skewers and deep-fried spiders, and my heart pounded while I waited for it to arrive.

"Order up!"

The lizards were just skewered and roasted whole, and the spiders were the same! It was very rustic cuisine, but at least it didn't stink. I was confident I could handle it.

The fried spiders were almost like crunchy confectionery. The legs were particularly brittle and easy to eat, and the whole thing was kinda sweet and delicious. They must have been marinated in something sugary before frying. The lizards were delicious too. The bones were annoying, but the flavor was magnificent, and the flesh was just the right texture. *And* everything was cheap to boot. I even wanted to order seconds!

"Only 800 LP, huh? I'm glad I came."

My bad experience with the seafood must have even heightened my second flavor experience. *Thank you, poor herring, although I shall never eat you again!*

Plenty of cities change once it gets dark, but in this town, the transformation was particularly dramatic. At night, all the children vanished. In their place, gaggles of women in strapless dresses and gangs of scarred and burly men roamed the streets. I headed back to the red-light district, feeling like the moon was silently judging me.

Numerous sex workers propositioned me as I went. Apparently, my face suited the local taste, because they always shouted out to me and called me cute. Admittedly, it wounded my masculine pride to be called *cute*, although the attention was nice.

I wasn't looking to go all the way, so I kept walking until I found a slightly more proper shop to visit. Eventually, I found exactly what I was looking for: "Harem Time—Satisfy Your Heart, Not Your Libido."

If the name was anything to go by, at least this place didn't trade in the passions of the flesh. Was there really anyone else interested in this stuff apart from me? Still, the rules outside clearly stated that they didn't provide "full service," so it seemed safe enough to go in. My heart still rattled as I opened the door.

"Welcome! Welcome!"

The friendly man just inside greeted me twice and guided me through the door. I was almost worried that he'd kick me out for being too young, but in the end, he didn't mention my age at all.

Inside, the club was large and littered with sofas and tables, each with a seated customer. It was dark and, if not for Night Vision, I would have struggled to make out people's faces. There was a surprising number of younger folks here, and most of them had the same weak aura as me.

"One moment, please. What name shall we call you?"

Huh, so a fake name was totally acceptable. But I couldn't decide on one in time, so I just told him Noir. Why did it matter anyway?

A few minutes later, I found out.

A woman in a revealing outfit slid onto the sofa next to me and smiled.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Noir. I'm so glad I could see you today."

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I had the chance, another woman sat down on my other side.

“Hey!” she said. “Don’t touch my Noir.”

“I haven’t laid a finger on him—*yet*.”

It went on like that for a while, both of them touching my arms and my chest as we were joined by a third, and eventually a fourth woman—crowding around me, straddling me…

It was all getting a little too much, but they seemed utterly unconcerned with how flustered I was. They kept groping me all over, and they started taking my hands to press them against whichever parts of their bodies they were most confident and comfortable with.

“Noir, you’re so my type. And I’m not just saying that because I have to,” said one of the women.

She buried my face in her chest, so, um, guess she wasn’t lying? At a glance, none of the other customers seemed to be getting this kind of treatment. Most of them were just holding hands with the girls. I was the only boy in here drowning in boobs.

“A cute boy like you must have plenty of experience,” she said.

“A-actually, I’ve never…”

“Why don’t you let me make you a man then?” she whispered in my ear.

My whole body tingled, but I shook my head. “I-I want my first time to be with someone I love!”

That only seemed to excite her more. “That’s adorable!”

I wasn’t sure if she was actually attracted to me or whether she just wanted to tease. Either way, I couldn’t help but take a peek at their skills. One of them even had something called Heavenly Release, which seemed completely terrifying. But I was sure I’d made the right call in coming here, all the same.

I must have done, because I was steadily earning LP. Best of all, because there were so many different women, I could keep doing different things with them and keep earning more and more. If there had only been

one of them, it wouldn’t have been long before we did everything we could and I stopped gaining any more LP for a day or so. As it was, I figured I could earn over 10,000 LP if I was diligent. And besides, I needed as much as I could get to fight Iesu, right? Right?!

If Emma or Lola had seen me that night, I’m sure they would have glared daggers.

Chapter 3:
Good and Evil

I SPENT THE TWO WEEKS after that earning as much LP as I could. After that, I found I'd gotten quite comfortable with life in the castle town. Of course, I also kept up my surveillance on Iesu—although his day-to-day life wasn't particularly eventful. At least there were no more attacks from the soldiers in the time that I watched him. He just worked diligently in his butcher's shop and hung out with his neighbors. After two weeks, I was wondering if he could be such a bad guy after all.

The one thing that made him change his routine was when he discovered someone with a valuable skill. When that happened, he quickly used his Brainwashing ability to bring them into the fold. It was strange how selective he was about it. I mean, he didn't just go for brute strength—something else was informing his choices. Maybe it had more to do with their personalities?

Whatever the case, the Brainwashing gradually wore off over time if Iesu didn't keep in touch, so he held large meetings on the weekends in a warehouse. I knew I was onto something when I saw the swordsman who'd fought with that street performer walk in, but I was ultimately too scared to infiltrate the gathering.

"I should get going."

I stared up at the ceiling of my room and steeled myself. All of my hard work had resulted in around 11,000 LP, and it was time to act. Around two or three times a week, Iesu went to a bar alone at night—just to drink, from what I'd seen. This was exactly the chance I had been waiting for. I had to get more information about his skills. There was no way I could make a move against him until I understood what Uninhibited could do. I really didn't want him to find out what I looked like, but given how much LP I had at my disposal, I figured I should be able to manage.

"Time to get up, Noir," Nina called. "Breakfast is ready."

"Thanks again."

“I made you an extra-large portion. You’re a growing boy, and it won’t be long before we take down Iesu together!”

By now, Nina and the rest of the Shields of Righteousness recognized me as a comrade, but I wanted to keep some distance between us. I mean, all I really wanted was to get home and see Emma and my other friends again. But Nina and her people were completely consumed by revenge. I was a little worried it might rub off on me, especially given that Iesu seemed to be motivated by the same thing. I just kept thinking: What would *I* do if someone killed Alice? I didn’t think I’d ever be able to forgive them.

“Did you learn anything about him?” Nina called through the door. “Did you find out where he is?”

“Still working on it.”

“Oh. Well, keep at it. By the way, an envoy from the castle has come to see you.”

“Got it.”

Nina smiled when I opened the door, but I couldn’t look her in the eye. No way was I going to tell her and the others where to find Iesu. I was sure that they wanted him dead, but I was determined to capture him alive. No, I would have to act alone.

I hurried downstairs and went out into the backyard to meet with the envoy and the several soldiers that had come with him.

“How are things progressing?” he asked.

“I think Iesu’s going to go drinking tonight or tomorrow,” I said. “That’s when I’m going to strike.”

“Trying to catch him drunk, huh? Not a bad idea. Do you require reinforcements?”

I hesitated. I could probably have used the help, but if Iesu Brainwashed them, it would just mean more enemies for me to fight.

“I wanna try it on my own first,” I said. “But I’d appreciate it if you could provide me with some cuffs or other restraints.”

“Understood. We’ll have them delivered this afternoon. Now, regarding Iesu’s whereabouts—”

“Shh!” I hissed.

Someone was listening on the other side of the door—I was sure of it. I ran over and wrenched it open to find Nina standing there, looking startled. Honestly, I couldn’t blame her for wanting more information.

“S-sorry,” she stammered. “I was worried about your breakfast getting cold.”

Exactly how much had she heard? It couldn’t have been very much. After all, the door was thick. Still, I said farewell to the soldiers and headed down for breakfast, then rested until midday when the envoy came back with the restraints I’d asked for.

The rope was made out of some kind of special material that no one could break. That meant it was time to hit the road. I stowed the rope away in my Pocket Dimension and went to check on Iesu.

“Welcome. Thank you for your loyal patronage, sir.”

When Iesu was working in his shop, he really was just a regular, good-natured guy. His customers seemed to love him too. He wasn’t up to anything unusual at that moment, so I headed back to the inn for a nap. That evening, I went back to his shop and I waited. Around eight, he closed up and headed to a bar.

“Good,” I muttered to myself. “It’s today. I knew it.”

The thought made me a bit anxious.

Two hours later, Iesu was done at the bar. He walked out into the night moving completely normally. I guess he hadn’t drunk much. He took the same path he’d followed to get there, then detoured down an alleyway.

I turned the corner behind him and steeled myself. This was it. There was plenty of space and no one around to see us. It was the perfect spot for a fight. I closed the distance to him.

“Iesu, I demand satisfaction.”

“What makes you think I’m Iesu?” he asked, turning around slowly.

But he didn’t look anything like the kindly butcher now. His gaze was icy cold, and my breath grew ragged in my throat. He didn’t even have an intimidation skill, but his aura was overwhelming.

“I have a Discerning Eye,” I said.

“That has a short range, doesn’t it?” he asked. “I should have noticed you staring at me before… Oh, now I remember.”

He must have seen me chase down the older woman who’d stolen Lola’s wallet.

“I know your Fangs of Wrath need money,” I said. “But you killed that woman because she failed to pick a pocket. That’s way over the line.”

Iesu shrugged. “Can’t be leaving evidence lying around. Plus, she was going to die sooner or later.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

But he just pulled a knife from his jacket. The blade was huge—almost a foot long. I swiftly used Discerning Eye for Items.

Strong Knife

Grade A

Skills: Sharp Edge

My sword had Sharp Edge too. It made a huge difference in the quality of the weapon, but before I had the chance to think much about it, Iesu came right at me.

He raised his knife to strike, but I calmly parried. He seemed much less experienced with a dagger than Emma, and he didn’t have any skills to back him up either. I just had to make sure not to get cut. I countered with a large downward strike.

“Hmph!”

Iesu dodged with a back step, but not quickly enough to avoid the blow entirely. He looked down at the sliced sleeve of his jacket with annoyance.

Ha! You see?! I can hold my own in close-quarters combat! I might even be able to win this.

“You’ve got some impressive skills,” he said. “Why don’t you use them for my cause?”

“Never. You’re a criminal.”

“So are the nobles. So is the king. Tell me: What’s the difference? They use innocent people as playthings. I want to save this city from such squandering bastards. I want you to lend me your power…I know you want it too…”

The world warped around me and my concentration slipped. All I could hear was Iesu’s calm voice echoing through the blank space of my mind.

Lend me your power. Lend me your power. Lend me your power. Lend me your power.

Maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad idea after all…

No, wait! This was his Brainwashing skill! It was just as well that I was a higher level than him and had thought to pick up that mental status effect skill. I’d have been lost without them.

Iesu seemed to realize his skill wasn’t working on me. “You really should have let yourself be Brainwashed,” he said. “Now I’m going to have to kill you.”

Iesu shuddered with murderous rage, and I almost didn’t notice the puddle of purple liquid that formed around my feet. It was the same technique he’d used to kill that thief! I jumped backward just as Iesu fired off a series of attacks.

“Ugh, Stone Bullets?”

But they weren’t. They couldn’t be, because ten of them appeared in the air beside him all at once, and he fired them off one at a time. I dodged and parried with my sword, but it wasn’t easy, and just as I thought the worst of it was over, he got close enough to strike out with his knife. I couldn’t get out of the way in time. Thankfully, the cut was too shallow to be dangerous, but damn, his sword was sharp! Strangely, Iesu didn’t press his advantage. Instead, he tried to regain some distance between us.

In the next moment, water rained down from overhead, drenching me through.

“Huh? What?”

Was it raining? No, the sky was supposed to be clear that night, and besides, this was far too much water all at once. At least it didn’t seem to contain any kind of fast-acting poison.

“Think you can dodge this time?” Iesu asked with a daring smile.

Before I knew it, rocks flew at me again. I finally understood what he was trying to do: He wanted to make my clothes so wet and heavy that they slowed my reaction times. But I wasn’t worried about that. As long as I kept my head in the game, I wouldn’t have any trouble dealing with…

Wait. Why was I swaying? Surely I wasn’t at my limit already!

I looked down at my feet and found the cobblestones were undulating beneath me. I didn’t have time to be amazed, though—more rocks were already flying at me. This time, I took three direct hits. The ones that hit my arm and thigh hurt a ton, but it was the last one that really did the damage.

“Ugh…”

It nailed me right in the temple. I staggered back, trying to keep my footing. It didn’t seem to be a particularly serious injury, but it was bleeding and it ached. Worse, it had slowed me down. If Iesu came at me with that knife again, I’d be done for.

I forced my body to stay standing, but when I looked at Iesu, I saw him panting. What was wrong with him? I opened up my Editor skill to find out.

Uninhibited: The wielder can manifest anything they can imagine but cannot directly manipulate living creatures. The more abnormal the phenomenon, the more concentration and stamina the use of the skill consumes.

Wh-whaaat?!

The skill’s description made me want to shriek. Could Iesu really turn anything he imagined into reality? That was just insane!

The only saving grace was that it couldn’t be used to directly poison or paralyze me. The stamina cost also explained why he was so out of breath. He’d been using the skill over and over, and he was starting to tire. That meant I had an opening. At least, I did in theory. Unfortunately, I hadn’t recovered enough to take advantage of it yet. Time to use Editor again!

Delete “manifest it in reality” — 25,000 LP

That seemed a little extreme. Well, then, destroying the skill was out of the question. Even worse, Iesu seemed to have recovered.

“You’re good,” he told me. “But let’s see how you like it when you can’t move!”

Suddenly, the buildings on either side of me grew arms that reached out to grab me. They looked vaguely human, but they were far too long and spindly. They were strong too. What kind of an imagination did this guy have?!

I cut through two of the strange arms and retreated to try to rethink my strategy, but Iesu was having none of it.

“You’re not getting away from me!”

More arms shot out from the buildings. I slid and jumped, my heart thumping with abject terror as the inhuman hands grasped and snatched at me. Then, as if things couldn’t get any worse, a volley of arrows appeared out of thin air. As flustered as I was, I managed to use Holy Flame to reduce them to ash. At least I still had my wits about me. I was pretty proud of that, to be honest.

For now, there was only one thing for it: I fled. I ran down the street as fast as I could, trying to keep an eye on Iesu over my shoulder, but he didn’t give chase. Out of stamina again, eh? Lucky me.

I managed to get far enough away that I could return to the inn. Nina was still awake, cleaning the floor. She looked up at me as I entered and frowned.

“Noir? You’re bleeding.”

“I just smacked my head on something in the dark. It’s not serious, so don’t worry. Good night.”

“S-sure,” she stammered. “Night.”

No way could I tell her about the fight with Iesu. I couldn’t let the Shields find out about him. I needed to get this job done on my own.

So I headed back to my room and treated my wounds with a salve. None of them were serious, and the fight had only made me stronger. If anything, it was the psychological damage I was worried about. I mean, could that guy seriously manifest *anything* he could think of? It was monstrous!

I flopped down on the bed to think over some possible countermeasures. Maybe I couldn’t break Iesu’s skill outright, but perhaps I could find a way to weaken it. I could even use Bestow to bind his legs and stop him from moving. I fired off ideas like that, one after another, until I started to doze. I must have been wasted.

I really didn’t want to fight Iesu more than I had to. After all, I had some sympathy for everything that had happened to him. The whole Noble Fight Club thing was horrific, but was there really anything that I could do to stop it? No matter how high my level got, I’d still be powerless against things like that.

“What should I do?” I muttered.

But my eyes drifted closed before I could find an answer, and I drifted off to sleep.

A while later—I’m not sure how long—I heard a low, heavy voice speaking to me from far too close

“You know, only fairy tales have heroes.”

I sat up with a start to find Iesu standing beside me. Damn it! Had he followed me here? Worst of all, he had a knife in his hand. His eyes were ice cold.

“But in the real world, everyone is a hero,” he said. “Don’t you agree?”

He didn’t wait for an answer as he swung the knife straight at my heart. I only just rolled away in time, narrowly avoiding death as the knife ripped through the bed. Somehow, I got to my feet and grabbed my sword from the table.

“If you’d kept your mouth shut, I’d probably be dead by now.”

Iesu shrugged. “I wanted to kill you in battle. I don’t always understand my own heart, but that’s what it wanted. Sometimes you just have to follow it.”

I knew what he meant. There were times I acted purely on impulse too.

“I understand,” I said. “But can we do this somewhere else? I promise I won’t try to run.”

There wasn’t much room to move in the room, and I didn’t want to cause problems for the inn. Oddly, Iesu didn’t like the thought of fighting in there either, because he didn’t argue.

Before he could change his mind about it, I pulled open the door and headed downstairs, but Nina caught me before I could get outside.

“Noir? What’s going on?”

“Nothing! I’m just heading out!”

I hurried through the back door with Iesu right behind me.

Nina frowned at him. “Who’s that?”

“Umm, just a friend. Don’t worry about it! I won’t be long!”

She was still staring at us, but we managed to get safely outside. We had to get clear of this place. I broke into a jog, making sure Iesu was still behind me. Where would be a good place to do this? The park was probably the best bet. It was still dark, and the whole place would be more or less deserted. There was a ton of open space, and the footing was even.

That settled, I headed to the park and stopped just beside the pond. When I turned around, Iesu was right behind me. He wasn’t even winded.

“People talk about you like you’re evil,” I said. “But you’ve been surprisingly cooperative.”

“We only commit crimes for the money,” he shot back. “I’m always careful to make sure innocent people don’t get hurt.”

“What about that thief of yours?” I asked. “You killed her right in front of me.”

Iesu’s expression twisted with distaste. “She pimped out two of her own children. And when they got sick, she had a man kill them.”

I wish I hadn’t asked. What a horrible story. The swordsman I’d seen Iesu Brainwash hadn’t seemed like a particularly good person either. Was he only Brainwashing people who deserved it?

No, I couldn’t start thinking like that. I didn’t have much mental fortitude at the best of times. It wouldn’t take much for him to pull one over on me.

“I don’t care what she did,” I said. “You can’t just go around killing people. You can’t take justice into your own hands. It isn’t right.”

“Justice is in the hands of the victor,” said Iesu. “That’s how the world works. You think the nobles only kill evil people? They’re evil themselves! They do whatever they please.”

Before I could argue, I had to dodge. Somehow, his emotional outburst was accompanied by an *actual* explosion. Had he done that on purpose?

This can’t be real!

I managed to avoid the blast, but it was stronger than I’d expected and sent me tumbling across the grass. By the time I got up again, Iesu was right next to me. Would I ever find a way to beat this guy? I wanted to cry.

I watched the tip of his toe drag slowly across the ground, then lift up into the air. Little dramatic, my guy! In the end, he just kicked me. It didn’t do too much damage, but it was enough to send me flying again.

“Huh?”

The moonlight above me suddenly disappeared. I looked up and saw a massive boulder plummeting out of the sky toward me. Was this how it felt to be a bug? All I could think of was my father stepping on a cockroach. I scrambled to my feet and managed to get away just in time.

When the boulder hit the ground, I flinched, expecting another explosion, but instead it simply disappeared. At the same time, the ground under my feet became thick and sticky. I couldn't move—damn. I looked up at Iesu and found him staring at the ground beneath me.

That Uninhibited skill really did let him do anything he wanted. All I could think to do was try to interrupt his concentration. I fired off the largest Stone Bullet I could muster.

"Well, well, how unusual."

He'd noticed it wasn't just a normal Stone Bullet, but he easily stepped out of the way. Still, I didn't need to hit him—I only needed to distract him. The ground was already getting firmer under my feet. I probably needed to keep moving, so I broke into a run and circled around him.

"Haaah…haaah…"

Iesu was panting for breath. He had to be getting low on stamina again. He was trying to conceal it, but there was no hiding it from me. My strategy was working. I snatched a few rocks up from the ground and threw them at his feet.

"Tch!"

He pulled his foot back reflexively, but he was getting slower. Yeah, he was *definitely* getting tired now. All I needed to do was draw this battle out, and maybe I could win. But just as I was getting excited about that idea, a wall of water appeared in front of me—so suddenly that I had no time to react. The wave crashed down on me, washing me away.

"Arrgh!"

I choked and swallowed a bunch of water. It was salty, as though it had come straight out of the sea, but my biggest problem was that the current pulled my sword from my hand and carried it away. I managed to get back to my feet and fired several Icicles at Iesu, but he dodged out of the way easily, as though he could see the future. I was starting to panic. No matter what I did, he was faster than me. I was going to lose.

"W-wait," I stammered.

I don’t even know why I said it. There was no way he was going to stop just because I asked him, so I was amazed when he simply fell over. Had he slipped somehow?

“Haaah…haaah…”

His shoulders heaved as he tried to catch his breath. Throwing out so many impressive effects had cost him. But rather than rushing to attack, I took some time to ensure my victory.

Extreme Stamina Consumption — 4,800 LP

Using Get Creative, I made a skill that made it easier to spend stamina. Now all I had to do was Bestow it on Iesu. How easy that would be depended very much on his natural affinity—Bestowing a skill like Slow on a fast and agile target cost a lot, but giving it to a more sluggish target was a cinch. It turned out that Iesu was built for endurance, because it was going to cost me another 4,800 LP to Bestow it on him.

All the same, I didn’t hesitate. This was exactly why I’d spent the last two weeks building up LP.

“And now…there you go!”

“What…what did you do?” Iesu snapped.

He was losing his edge; he didn’t seem to realize what had changed.

“I know your weakness now,” I told him. “You don’t have enough stamina to keep going, and that will never change now, no matter how much you train. You could even kill yourself by trying. Surrender now.”

“What…?” Iesu blinked at me. “You think my life still has value? I haven’t feared death in a long time. Not since I saw my sister’s corpse in front of me!”

I’d thought I had him, but the glint in his eye told me otherwise. If I wasn’t careful, I could get swept up in his energy. Instead, I retrieved my sword and readied myself as Iesu got back to his feet. He was covered in mud and wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket. His eyes were burning with cold.

“This whole city is filthy,” he growled. “The buildings, the streets, the people who live here, even the king. It’s rotten through.”

“You know,” I said, “I have a little sister too. I—”

“You think you can understand?” he shouted. “One day she was there with me, and the next she was gone. When I saw her again, she was dead. Mutilated. All the signs of her suffering carved into her corpse. Like hell you understand that!”

Suddenly, I remembered Alice’s smile.

She was always there, always looking out for me. And I was sure Iesu had loved his sister just as much. If I were in his place, would I really be that different?

“Kid, you’re using your power to aid that filthy rat of a king. You’re just another one of his dogs. And I plan to take you down with me, even if it’s the last thing that I do.”

There was nothing I could do to stop him. Iesu poured every last drop of his strength into one final, terrifying attack.

“Arrgggh!”

A sharp wind whipped around me, tearing up the arm I threw out in front of me. Thankfully, the wounds weren’t very deep, but there were hundreds of them. Blood poured down my hand and dropped into the grass. It was like the wind had turned into razors.

Before it could envelop the rest of me, I pulled the Shield of Champions out of my Pocket Dimension. With its Durable skill and A-Grade Fire, Water, and Wind Resistance, it had already saved my life a number of times and was probably about to do so again. I hid myself behind it and backed away, trying to wrest some control over the situation.

“You think…you’re clever…” Iesu panted.

He could hardly speak. The more impossible things he brought into being, the more concentration and energy his skill sucked out of him. And with the detrimental skill I’d Bestowed on him, he was nearing his limit. All I had to do now was keep backing away until he hyperventilated and died.

Wait. Was that really what I wanted?

The second I got caught up in thinking about that, I was enveloped in a pillar of flame. There was no way out, and no gaps to slip through.

Despite the Shield of Champions, I felt the heat burn my skin. I had to do something fast!

“What do you think will happen first?” Iesu called from somewhere beyond the flames. “You roast to death, or I croak? I guess we’re about to find out which one of us is stronger!”

I couldn’t see him through the fire, but I heard the fearlessness in his voice. All the same, I was confident I would win this one. I still had a few thousand LP left over, after all. I could use it to give myself Fire Resistance—but I’d already had a better idea.

Focusing my mind, I made the biggest Water Drop that I could muster and sent it rocketing straight up into the sky. It rose and rose until it couldn’t fight gravity any longer, then broke apart and showered back down again. It wasn’t enough to put out the flames, but it drenched me to the point that the worst of the fire couldn’t touch me, at least for a while. Long enough, in any case, for me to raise the Shield of Champions and press forward out of the wall of fire.

“Hmm…haahh…”

Iesu gasped and grabbed at his throat. He was struggling to breathe. Had he pushed himself so far past his limit? Or was he still trying to use Uninhibited, despite everything? I was impressed by his tenacity, but I didn’t let it distract me. I dropped my shield to the ground and sprinted toward him until—

“Urgh?!”

I sliced through his left arm just below the elbow, severing it completely. Between the pain and his difficulty breathing, finally, it was enough. Iesu crumbled to the ground and clutched at the wound at his elbow, trying to stop the bleeding.

I felt…

I felt bad for him.

How strange. I’d never felt that way about an enemy before, but Iesu was different. He was indomitable. Even now, he was still trying to talk.

“Kill me, then!” he snarled. “What’s wrong with you? Do you enjoy watching people suffer?! You’re no better than the king!”

I knelt down beside him. “This sword isn’t for killing. I used it to save you. If you keep living as you have been, you will die.”

“And what?” Iesu spat. “Is surrendering to you any better?! It might even be worse!”

He was probably right. If I took him to the king like this, they’d make him suffer terribly before they executed him. They’d want to make an example of him. I shuddered.

“I’m not telling you to forget your sister,” I said. “But you have to choose to live a different life. There’s still a future waiting for you, Iesu. Or at least, there could be.”

Iesu looked up at me. “You’ve got what you wanted. You’ve beaten me. So why are *you* the one crying?”

“I-I didn’t realize…”

I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, but the tears wouldn’t stop coming. It left me wide open to attack, but more than that, it was just embarrassing. And still I couldn’t stop. Every time I tried, I just kept thinking about how happy Iesu and his sister must have been when they were together. It reduced me to ashes. There was no way I could fight against it.

But instead of taking advantage of my weakness, Iesu asked, “Can you really forgive what I’ve done? I’ve killed people. I’ve killed a *lot* of people pursuing my goal, even if they were all evil. And I forced them to steal, before I did. My sister hated to see people in pain. She hated it more than anything. Do you think that *she* would forgive me?”

“Even if she couldn’t—even if the gods will not forgive you—I will.”

Iesu fell silent after that, and I tore strips off of his clothes to stop his bleeding. He didn’t struggle at all. He just lay there and let me treat him.

“You’re a kind soul,” he said at last. “But you know that you’re in danger, right?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I don’t want you to die. Living with one arm won’t be easy, but it has to be better than death.”

“I’ll be fine,” said Iesu. “But I will not promise to give up my quest. Not yet.”

“But you should,” I urged him. “You need to abandon your old identity and start a new life somewhere. Though ultimately, that’s all up to you. Although, even if you choose to continue, I’d prefer it if you used another name.”

He laughed at that. It was the first time I’d heard him laugh.

Would he really choose another path, or was I just being foolish? Childish? No. I had given him another chance, and he would find a way to use it. I believed that. I had to believe it.

Once I’d stopped the bleeding, I stored his severed arm away in my Pocket Dimension. Iesu didn’t have any use for it anymore, and I needed it for what I had planned next.

I didn’t know what else to say to him now, but in the end, I didn’t get the chance.

A voice carried to us on the night wind, full of hate and rage.

“How touching. But do you really think that *I* will forgive your evil deeds so easily?”

It took me a moment to realize the voice was Nina’s.

Nina’s twisted expression and bloodshot eyes made her look like a completely different person. It made me think of how even the laziest of cats turn into a monster the second a mouse walks past. Only the mouse she was hunting was Iesu, and she would do anything to get her revenge.

“It was cruel of you not to tell me you’d found him, Noir.”

She must have followed us from the inn. She must have overheard our entire conversation too. She turned her attention to Iesu.

“So even a lowlife piece of garbage like you can feel pain, huh?” she asked, glaring at him. “Do you even remember Parat? Do you remember killing him?”

Iesu took a shaky breath. “Yes. I remember that boy.”

“Well, I hope you remember murdering him, because that’s exactly what’s about to happen to you!”

Her voice rose to a booming shout and her body began to swell and grow. A horn sprouted from the center of her forehead. Her muscles bulged, and her skin took on a reddish hue. In the empty park under the moonlight, she looked both magical and utterly terrifying, and her transformation wasn’t just aesthetic. When I checked her with Discerning Eye, I found her level had risen to over 150.

Still, what she’d said had made me curious. I turned back to Iesu. “Why did you kill Parat?” I asked him.

Iesu coughed. “He was a sadist. He’d tortured and killed people. Women, children, the elderly. He made the weakest ones kill each other. I saw what he was doing, and I killed him.”

I wasn’t surprised. It must have reminded him of what happened to his sister. By the sounds of it, Parat was no better than the nobles and their sick little fight club.

I looked at Nina for some sign of shock, but her expression didn’t change. She didn’t even bother to deny it. She must have known all along.

“Parat had his flaws,” she said at last. “But he was still my little brother.”

“I think what he did goes beyond having ‘flaws,’ Nina,” I said.

But my careless words just made her angrier. Blood vessels stood out on her forehead. Somehow, I managed to put myself between her and Iesu. My hands were shaking.

“You need to leave him alone,” I told her. “Let me handle it.”

“Parat had abnormal strength,” said Iesu. “You should avoid close combat.”

I nodded and picked up my sword.

Nina laughed. “Look at you. You’re exhausted. Do you really think you can beat me?”

She didn’t wait for me to answer as she rushed me all at once. Her movements were simple and predictable, but she was so incredibly fast that

I could barely track her. I swung my sword about, just trying to keep her back.

Thwap!

Something struck me hard across the cheek and the world spun around. I had to struggle to stay conscious. Before I could get back up again, something kicked me in the stomach and sent me rolling across the grass. I was still sore from fighting Iesu. This was too much. I wanted to sob.

“This is your last chance, Noir,” said Nina. “Give Iesu to me, or I’ll turn your body into a sieve.”

She pulled a rock out of her pocket, and I pretended to stagger as I got up—to give me a chance to use Discerning Eye for Items on it. But the stone was…just a regular stone? I didn’t understand.

“Ever since I arrived here,” I said, “I’ve lost track of what ‘right’ even is. But I’d rather choose what I can see and feel over any lofty ideals about justice.”

“So you’ve chosen death. You are a fool!”

A gust of wind rushed past me. I tried to dodge out of the way of the stone, but it hit me right in the arm. I couldn’t stop myself from screaming. I didn’t think it was broken, but it really hurt like hell.

“Come on!” Nina roared. “I’m going to smash you to pieces!”

She grinned at me. It looked like she was having fun. I couldn’t sense anything from her besides pure, sadistic glee. Was it a side effect of the transformation?

“Here, kid!” Iesu shouted behind me. “Use this!” He picked up the Shield of Champions with his remaining hand and tossed it to me.

“Thanks!”

I held it up to guard against the rocks. However strong Nina was now, a rock was still a rock. While I sheltered behind the shield, I came up with a plan. I hunkered down and stopped moving. I could still hear rocks bouncing off the shield, but they couldn’t hurt me.

“Is this how a man fights?” she demanded. “You’re pathetic. Did you leave your balls back at home?”

I heard faint footsteps between the crack of the rocks. She was coming closer. It was working.

“Hah!” she shouted. “Got you!” She was standing right over me. Her face contorted with a horrible smile and she seized me by the collar, dragging me up off of my feet with her herculean strength. “It’s over, Noir.”

“You’re right,” I said. “It is.”

I might have been a coward, but I wasn’t cowering in fear. I was waiting for her to get in point-blank range. Now that she had me in her grasp, I fired off Blinding Light. As the bright white haze poured out of my fingers, Nina reeled backward.

“Augh!”

Unable to see, she stumbled away from me and I seized my chance. I swept her legs out from under her and she fell flat on her backside. Then I grabbed her by the arm and used one of the pins Leila had taught me, twisting until the bone snapped.

Nina roared and howled. I tried to grab her other arm, but before I could get a hold of her, she grabbed me and flung me up into the air again.

“Too strong…” I somehow managed to right myself in midair and landed magnificently on my ass. Yep. What a hero.

“Damn you, Noir!”

Nina charged me again before I could get up. Fear grabbed me by the throat. I tried to run, but it was useless. I was about to die. She was going to kill me.

But before Nina could reach me, a towering wall of earth shot up between us. Nina crashed right into it and brought the whole thing down on top of herself. Talk about hardheaded!

Of course, this miracle was Iesu’s doing.

“This is your only chance,” he rasped, gasping for air. “End this.”

“Got it.”

I gathered myself up and decided what to do. I figured thunder would be best. It was difficult to use in the middle of combat, but while Nina was still fighting to get out from underneath that wall, it was perfect. As she struggled, I nailed her with a Thunderbolt.

“Damn…it…all…” she groaned.

She flopped over and stopped moving. I’d won!

I mean…I *had* won, right? She could still have been pretending. I approached her carefully, but she was out cold. My thunderbolts weren’t anywhere near as powerful as the real thing, and her ogre form probably protected her from serious injury.

Iesu, on the other hand, was struggling to breathe again. I helped him to his feet.

“I guess this is goodbye,” I said. “I know I keep going on about it, but I really hope that you think long and hard about how you want to live the rest of your life.”

“I hope you’re not expecting me to thank you,” Iesu snorted. “And like I said, I’m not promising anything.”

I nodded. “That’s fine. Just think about it. And go to see a healer. You’re going to need one after this.”

I couldn’t be sure, but I thought he gave me a small nod. That would have to be enough.

I headed out of the park but soon realized that I had no idea how long Nina would be unconscious. It felt too weird to go back to the inn, so I found a bench in a public square to spend the rest of the night.

When I woke up again, I was so cold that my limbs ached. I couldn’t wait to get back home and see everyone again.

The next morning, I knelt down in front of King Gyro. I presented him with Iesu’s arm and announced that he was dead.

“No body?” Gyro asked. He frowned, looking dissatisfied, but I didn’t let it ruffle me.

Instead, I told him that I’d used such powerful magic to kill Iesu that the rest of his body had burned to ash. Not even bones were left behind, just the arm that had been severed at some point earlier in the battle.

I told him what Iesu looked like too—sticking close enough to what he already knew that it didn’t sound like an obvious lie but making up enough of the details to give Iesu the chance at a new start, if he wanted one.

“Hmmm. Did he suffer when he perished?”

“He did. But his dying words were only full of hatred. He regretted not being able to destroy you and every noble in this city.”

“Yes, perfect!” said Gyro, his face lighting up. “Delightful!”

This was exactly what he wanted to hear. He clapped his hands in glee like a child. I supposed he’d always used his power to crush anyone who stood against him, and Iesu was the one person who’d managed to evade him. How disgusting.

Gyro cleared his throat. “However, it is not inconceivable that this arm could belong to someone else. We should like to extend your stay by another two weeks. Should Iesu not reappear by then, you shall receive your reward, whatever it should be.”

“No, thanks,” I said. “I’m heading home. I miss my friends and family.”

“You’re what?!” Gyro spluttered. “You shall do no such thing. We shall not suffer this insubordination!”

I got up from my knees. “Excuse me, but I am not one of your soldiers, Your Majesty. And I am not lying about this being Iesu’s arm.”

I mean, I wasn’t! The truth was unquestionably on my side on this one. Of course, how the king would react to it was a different matter. He was still frowning at me, so I decided to fit in another jab.

“And besides, could you even give me the reward I want? Because what I *really* want is for you to put an end to this revolting Noble Fight Club.”

Gyro gasped, his eyes widening with shock. At least he had the decency to look guilty about the whole thing. Somewhere in there, he knew that he was doing something wrong.

“You’re playing games with innocent people’s lives,” I told him. “As their king, you cannot allow that to continue. If you do, you will only lay the foundations for another Iesu to arise and oppose you.”

“Hrmph…”

Was that it? Seemed so.

I shot him one last look, then bowed my head and left. As I headed for the door, I broke out in a cold sweat, waiting for the soldiers to attack me. But no one moved, and soon I was safely out of the castle and back in the streets.

I headed straight for a shop that painted signs and billboards and purchased one of my own. It was expensive, but it would be worth it. The writing I wanted on it was simple: “The aristocracy forces innocent people to kill each other for fun. They call it Noble Fight Club. Will you stand for this? Rise up!”

When it was done, I hung it along one of the busiest streets in town. Just a little revenge from an entirely anonymous humble traveler.

It was almost time to head home, but I needed to stop at the inn first to get my bags. There was no one behind the counter when I arrived, so I crept quietly up to my room and gathered my things, leaving my payment on the counter. But Nina must have heard me, and she came out from the back before I could make my escape.

“Yes? Who is…”

She stopped and stared at me like I was her bitterest enemy.

“I, uh, figured I ought to pay you,” I said. “So, um, thank you. For everything.”

Nina counted my coins, her face glacier cold. To be honest, I was relieved she didn’t punch me.

“Get out,” she said. “I never want to see your face again.”

She didn’t have to tell me twice!

I did as I was told and headed for the door. It was a shame we had to leave things on such a sour note, but she had looked after me while I stayed here, so I bowed my head in respect on my way out. Nina’s expression grew colder.

“I’ll never forgive you for what you did,” she said. “Not as long as I live. It was wrong.”

“I don’t know if it was right or not,” I admitted. “But I stand by my choice. Goodbye.”

There didn’t seem much point in arguing about it, so I left quietly and turned toward the edge of town. It was tragic to have a friend turn into an enemy like that, but you can’t always please everyone.

Either way, I was on my way home at last. I set my eyes on the horizon and started walking.

Chapter 4:
I’m Home!

IT WAS NIGHT when I reached my hometown, with the crescent moon watching over me high in the sky. It had been a long journey, but it was finally over. I was home.

Of course, summer vacation had ended weeks ago, so I was certain Ms. Elena would have some choice words for me when I got to school, but it didn’t matter. I was too excited about the idea of seeing everyone again.

I hurried through the darkness to get home. The moment I opened the front door, a huge sense of relief washed over me.

“I’m baaaaack!”

No answer.

But I could hear people talking in the living room. Didn’t they care that I was home? As I slipped inside, I realized someone was crying. It was Alice. What had happened?!

“Please come home safe, Brother Dearest,” she said. “I would give my life to ensure your safe return. And Father’s life too.”

“Hey! You’d sacrifice *me*?!”

Looked like Father was a ball of energy as always. I walked into the living room to find he was swinging a sword around for some reason. Was he practicing in the house? If a stranger saw him acting like this, I was sure they’d think he was insane.

“Goodness!” said my mother. “Well, I suppose that I shall have to join you both!”

She was smiling. It was good to see her in such high spirits. There was a giant black lion next to her with a flower growing out of his head—although technically Tigerson was a monster, not a lion.

<I shall go save Noir. I cannot abandon a friend.>

“Then take me with you!” Alice cried. “My dearest brother is calling me! I know it!”

She really was getting worked up. If I’d been gone any longer, they would probably have come out to find me for real! I was glad they were thinking about me, but I wanted to spare them any further anguish.

“Um, Alice?” I said, announcing my arrival. “I’m fine.”

“Did you hear that?!” she shouted. “I knew it! That was brother’s voice!”

<I heard it as well! He must be using some kind of skill to communicate with us.>

“Noir! This is your father speaking. I’m fine too.”

The three of them were staring up at the ceiling. Did they think I was speaking to them from the afterlife? My mother was the only one who noticed me standing right there. She pulled something from the shelf and came over to me.

“Welcome home,” she said, smiling brightly. “I knew you’d come back safe. You’ve grown incredibly strong lately, haven’t you?”

I almost couldn’t bear to look at her. The second I saw her face, my chest filled with emotion and my eyes welled with tears. Her kindness and her warmth could heal any wound.

But Mother, I thought. *What is that honeycomb you’re holding? And why is it packed with some strange red substance?*

She must have seen me looking at it, because she handed it over.

“Here you go! It’s one of my latest creations. I saved it for you.”

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, huh? To think that I had traveled so far and fought so many battles when my greatest enemy was here in my own home all along.

Alice and the others were still listening for my voice with their eyes closed. I shook my head and came to stand between the three of them.

“Hello? Alice? Tigerson? I’m not in the afterlife. I’m home. I’m right here.”

“Brother?!”

<Oooh, Noir, you have returned!>

“Ahhh, my dear boy! Wait…why did you leave me out? Hey, why didn’t you mention me?!”

Alice hugged me and started crying, so I stroked her hair and petted Tigerson’s head. I even felt bad for my father. He had tears in his eyes, so I consoled him too.

When I told them I hadn’t had dinner, they set about treating me to all sorts of things—from food to shoulder rubs. My family was so warm and generous. It was so good to be home! I drank in the happiness as though I was parched. Although…I had to admit…I put off trying my mother’s honeycomb chili for the time being.

We sat down at the table, and I told them about what had happened. And of course, I didn’t leave out news of my elder brother. I told them everything without papering over the less flattering parts. Even so, my mother and father were happy. Maybe they were just relieved to see me back alive and well.

Apparently, they were having their own problems too. Our family shop, Stardian Rarities, had earned the ire of the other establishments in the area. They were probably just upset about how well we were doing, but Tigerson was scary enough to have kept the peace so far.

<However, we don’t know if they shall cause trouble again. They may even try to make a move when I am not around.>

“I guess I’ll just have to step in,” I said.

I wasn’t about to let anyone threaten my family, or our chance of improving our lot.

“Brother Dearest,” Alice said. “You ought to get some rest. Surely you must be tired.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. Thank you for always looking out for me, Alice.”

“Nothing could make me happier!”

She was always so over the top!

I climbed the stairs to my room and found that there wasn't so much as a single speck of dust on the floor. My sheets were fresh, and my shelves were all in order. Mother and Alice must have been in there to clean.

I collapsed on my bed, appreciating their efforts.

My bed was so comfortable, and I was so happy to be home, that I fell asleep right away.

The next morning, I woke up to tranquil silence. When I had stayed at the inn, I had usually awoken to the voices of the other guests, so I basked in the quiet for a while before heading downstairs. Tigerson was the only one there.

<I am glad that you seem to have slept well.>

"Morning. Where's everyone else?"

<They've already left. It is past ten, after all.>

"It's how late?!"

I'd almost slept away the morning, and I was meant to be in school! I'd even been looking forward to going back to the Hero Academy last night.

<Alice prepared breakfast for you. I can take you to class once you finish.>

I sat and wolfed my meal down as fast as I could. *I'm sorry, Alice. I know how much work you put into this.*

Then I got on Tigerson's back and headed to school.

"You were planning to go to the shop today, right, Tigerson?" I asked. "Thanks for all the hard work you do for us."

<It is nothing. You are my friends. That said, the stock is running dangerously low…>

I had been out of the country for some time. Tigerson could replenish some of the stock by hunting, and Father could acquire a little more from

his connections, but that would only last so long. It sounded like their supply lines were almost exhausted.

“I’ll handle it,” I assured him. “I’ll go back to the dungeon soon.”

<Just promise you won’t force yourself. It is a dangerous place, even for a hidden dungeon.>

I’d since learned that this particular dungeon was called the Infinite Labyrinth. It wasn’t the only one in the world, and I guessed that Tigerson had visited others in his time, but apparently while I was out of town, a new one had been discovered.

<It was found near the town of Korot,> Tigerson explained. *<I’m told only those with special dispensation are allowed to enter.>*

“I’m not even done with the Infinite Labyrinth yet, and another one’s been discovered?!”

That was exciting news, and Korot was close. I’d have to check it out when I had the time. Although…I’d probably never get permission to go in. *Guess I should focus on finishing the Infinite Labyrinth first*.

And besides, I wanted to see Olivia again.

A strong wind blew down the street as I was distracted with my thoughts, and I heard a group of young women shriek as it blew up their skirts. I couldn’t take my eyes off them. Apparently, my Lucky Lecher skill had gone off again for the first time in a while. At least it earned me a little LP.

<Remember, don’t push yourself too hard.>

“You should take your own advice sometime, friend.”

When we reached the school gates, I climbed down from Tigerson’s back. As I neared to the classroom, I heard Ms. Elena’s voice. Apparently, it was a lecture day.

I slipped quietly inside, trying not to disturb everyone, and crept over to my desk. But I couldn’t help noticing Leila sitting nearby. What was she doing in S-Class?

And why were there flowers all over my desk?! I wasn’t dead!

As I got closer, I heard Emma mumbling to herself. “We’ll be together in heaven. I’ll never be with anyone else, not as long as I live…”

I couldn’t keep it in any longer. “But I’m not dead yet!”

“Noir?!”

“Wh-what…?”

I was cut off as Emma leaped up and hugged me. I was happy to see her too, so I wrapped my arms around her. I probably should have let her know I was back last night. *Sorry, Emma!*

“I’m so glad you’re okay! I thought you might have died!”

“All the same,” I said. “I think the memorial flowers are a bit much…”

“Don’t be silly! They’re for the safe return of a loved one. They don’t wilt easily, so they’re meant to bring you back safe. I guess they worked!”

Emma smiled at me tearfully. I really was home. There was so much I wanted to tell her, but my sudden return had caused quite a stir in the classroom.

“Sit down!” Ms. Elena shouted. “Who gave you permission to get out of your seats?!”

Nice to see she hadn’t lost her hard-nosed former-mercenary edge! When things settled down, Ms. Elena walked up to me and looked me over. Her eyes were much softer than I’d expected them to be. Was she making sure I was all right?

“I’m…glad you’re home safe.”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “But I made it out alive somehow.”

I mean, I *had* almost died more times than I could count.

To my surprise, Ms. Elena stepped in and embraced me. It was a shock, but it did feel nice. I relaxed into it. After a moment, she let me go and turned back to the other students.

“I’m sure you’re all aware that Noir and his friends went to a neighboring kingdom recently. They saved Honest from a monster attack, and Noir figured out what was causing it. So I’d like to invite you to give them all a hearty round of applause.”

The classroom erupted with clapping. Everyone's eyes were sparkling and bright. Talk about embarrassing! I scratched the back of my head and tried to explain that I didn't deserve it.

"Would you mind telling us a bit about it?" Ms. Elena asked. "I'm curious both personally and as your teacher."

"Umm…okay."

She didn't even seem at all mad at me for missing class, so really, this was the least I could do.

I stood up and told them about my trip. I explained everything that had happened in Honest, but when it came to Iesu, I glossed over the details. I didn't know if they'd agree that I should have let him go. To be honest, I still wasn't sure about it myself.

When I'd finished talking, everyone started asking questions. Soon, I was exhausted all over again.

During break, I went to find Leila so I could ask why she was in S-Class all of a sudden.

"I switched classes while you were off on your little adventure."

That made sense. There were a lot of good-for-nothing nobles in the Hero Academy, but the school did operate on merit. If your grades were bad, you'd go down a class, and the opposite was also true; excellent students quickly rose through the ranks.

"I'm glad we're in the same class now," I told her. "There are still so many martial arts techniques I want to learn from you!"

"I'd be happy to teach you!" said Leila. "Although I think there are more things that I'd like *you* to teach *me*."

Before we could continue our conversation, Emma came over and pinched my arm.

"Aren't you forgetting about your best friend in the whole wide world?" she asked, puffing out her cheeks.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m glad we can work together again. You’re like the air to me.”

“Th-the air?” Emma stammered. “O-okay…well, um…I-I guess I’m okay with that?”

She seemed a little confused. Had I said the wrong thing? I’d meant that she was as important to me as breathing, but maybe it hadn’t come across that way. I probably should have said something else, but I had never been very good with words.

Regardless, it was good to be back at school, especially because of all the incredible people in my class. But before I got any further with that thought, I was brought back to reality with a bang.

“Don’t let all your fancy adventures give you any ideas. You’re still just the son of some baronet. A nobody.”

It was one of the boys from my class. For the life of me, I couldn’t remember his name.

I shrugged. “I just want to live a life without shame. My rank doesn’t matter next to that.”

The boy snorted. “Preposterous.”

And that was the end of that conversation. I guess not *everyone* in my class was as kind as Emma and Leila.

There would always be people like him. I’d been running into them ever since I got accepted into the academy. It didn’t matter where you went—the world was still full of petty aristocrats who thought that rank and social status was a measure of individual worth, and those guys would always find me wanting. It worked well enough for them, but it only seemed to inspire arrogance and resentment…and people like Iesu.

Either way, I had other things to worry about right now. I headed over to the guidance counseling office and found Ms. Elena sitting there alone.

“Sorry to ask you here when you’re already exhausted,” she said. “But to be honest, I’ve been really suffering without you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I figured as much.”

Ms. Elena always had such sore shoulders. I suspected it was because she didn't get much exercise now that she was a teacher. But I had the Shoulder Rub skill, so I put it to work and gave her a shoulder rub.

"I've been looking forward to this," she said.

I worked on the knots in her back for ten minutes or so and, in exchange, she gave me a hug and helped me earn some more LP. She even gave me a pat on the head, even though I didn't ask for it.

"I've been starting to think of you as a little brother," she told me. "Not that I can give any of my students special treatment, of course."

"I mean, you wouldn't be the only teacher to play favorites."

She smacked me gently on the head. "Watch that tongue, young man."

It was true though. Some of the teachers acted more like servants around the children of high-ranking nobles, although Ms. Elena would never stoop so low.

By afternoon, school was done and I headed for the guild. I was still an adventurer, after all. I needed to report in, and besides, I wanted to see Lola.

Not much had changed in Odin's guild hall—people chatted and drank beer, studied monsters, and gave each other hunting advice. The whole place was full of adventurers, but I never felt unwelcome there. It was an accepting place. The guild's members would have made my master proud.

"Hey, Noir!" one of the veteran adventurers called out. "You're finally back from your trip, huh? Good to see you again!"

"Thanks!" I called back. "Is Lola around?"

He pointed to a table at the back where Lola was arm wrestling with a bunch of adventurers—beating them one after another.

"She's been like that ever since she came back," said the veteran. "In a bad mood, if you ask me. And how does a receptionist even get that strong?"

Because she had a Superhuman Strength skill, of course! Plus I'd given her some other skills to boot. She'd have made a great adventurer herself at this point.

"Hi, Lola. I'm back."

"Huh?!"

The second I said her name, Lola ran over and hugged me.

"Mr. Noooooooooir! I've waited so long for you!"

Lola, do you have to hug me so tight?! You're hurting me!



I was happy when she finally let go. I could hardly breathe!

When she drew back, I saw that her eyes were wet.

“I knew you’d be okay. I *knew* it. But I was so worried about you. I had to do something to deal with my anxiety.” She looked back at the men she’d been arm wrestling. “Now that you’re back, I can finally be done with these guys.”

That was an intense way to deal with stress! The men didn’t even seem upset when she said she was done with them. If anything, they were almost weeping with gratitude. She’d hurt their arms, sure, but it had hurt their egos more to be beaten so thoroughly by a receptionist.

Sorry it took me so long to get back, guys!

Lola and I sat down together and had a long chat, but nothing much seemed to have changed at Odin.

“I just wanted to drop by and say hello,” I said. “But I’ll be back again tomorrow.”

Lola smiled. “I can’t wait.”

“Are you going to keep working as a receptionist?” I asked. “You’re so strong now!”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “But I’m happy where I am. And besides, I want to help *you* get stronger too, Noir.”

She reached out and tapped me on the nose. This cute side was the secret to her popularity. I asked her about Luna, but as soon as I mentioned her, Lola’s expression darkened.

“Honestly, she hasn’t been by lately. I think she’s dealing with something pretty serious, but she won’t talk to me.”

If Luna couldn’t even speak to her best friend about a problem, then it had to be bad. Maybe Luna just didn’t want to trouble Lola with it. Or perhaps talking about it wouldn’t help.

“You may have a better shot of getting something out of her, Mr. Noir,” Lola said. “Just let me know how I can help.”

I promised I would and got to my feet, but Lola called out after me when I tried to leave.

“I-I wanted to give you this! Please feel free to use it at any time.”

She grinned and handed me a slip of paper on which the words “Naughty Game Ticket” were written. I asked what kind of *naughty* game she meant, but Lola just said I’d have to use it and find out. She loved doing stuff like this, so I tucked the ticket into my pocket for later and headed to the temple.

Luna worked mostly as a cleric, but she adventured on the side. Sort of like me. The townspeople all admired her for the great work she did, and it probably didn’t hurt that she was a beautiful half-elf.

When I arrived, the temple was overflowing with people coming there to be healed as well as to worship. You didn’t even have to be particularly devout to receive treatment, so long as you said you believed in the gods. As you might expect, that meant a lot of people came when they couldn’t visit a regular clinic for whatever reason.

Luna’s line was usually the longest, but I couldn’t see her today. I went over to one of the people standing in line and asked them about it.

“Is Cleric Luna off today?”

“No, she’s just on a break. I think she stepped outside, but you shouldn’t bother her.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

I left the line and headed around the side of the building. It seemed there was a rule about not bothering Luna when she was on a break, but I hoped they’d at least let me tell her I was home. I followed the wall around until I got to the back of the temple, wondering where she could be. But when I found her, she was with someone. I hid in the shadow of the building. Not because I shouldn’t be there—I just didn’t want to interrupt.

“I know I’ve mentioned it a thousand times, but it really is for your own good. At least give it some serious thought,” said the man.

“I know,” Luna said. “But…I’m still not ready…”

“Would you at least agree to a meeting? That way, at least I can save some face.”

He bowed his head to her, almost pleading for her help. He was a little older, perhaps in his fifties, and I’d seen him before around here. He

was one of the priests at the temple.

"Well," said Luna. "If it's just a meeting, then…"

"Wonderful!" cried the priest. "Let's make it next Sunday!"

He looked overjoyed and started to walk in my direction. In a panic, I hid behind a tree until he was gone. When Luna started to follow, I stepped out in front of her. She was walking slowly and hanging her head. What exactly did he want her to do?! It had to be awful.

"Luna. Luuuna!"

I waved at her, and her face brightened instantly. "S-S-S-Sir Noir! You're home?!"

She raced over to me and grabbed my hands, jumping up and down excitedly. She was really pleased to see me! She almost never dropped her cool, collected exterior.

We chatted for a while after that. I reassured her that I wasn't injured and gave her a brief summary of everything that had happened since I last saw her.

"I'm so glad you're okay! I've been so worried about you. I've barely been able to sleep!"

Well, she *did* have dark circles under her eyes.

"I'm sorry if I made you worry," I said. "Is there anything else that's bothering you?"

Luna started. "Ugh…wh-what do you mean?!"

"To be honest? Lola's worried about you. She said you seemed really down."

Luna smiled a little. "I guess I can't hide anything from her."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

Luna hesitated, then sighed and shook her head. "One of the priests I work with is trying to match me with a man, but I don't want to get married! But…the priest has done so much for me… I can't just say no."

I nodded, and Luna kept talking. Apparently, the priest I'd seen her talking to was friends with a wealthy merchant, and the merchant's son was

looking for a wife. According to Luna, this guy was very particular and disliked regular humans. He wanted an elf, a half-elf, or a beast folk.

"Why does he hate humans?" I asked.

"He doesn't want someone who'll get old and unattractive," Luna said. "I can't understand that. Isn't it better to see someone's life when you look at their face?"

It sounded like this guy just wanted someone who'd stay young and beautiful forever. Unfortunately for him, most of the people in town were human.

"I think it would be best to meet him and turn him down gently," I said. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Luna's eyes lit up. "Could you…maybe…pretend to be my little brother and come to the meeting with me?"

"Sure. What's the plan?"

"I guess just…say lots of disparaging things about your big sister in front of him?" Luna asked.

Psychological warfare, huh? Convince him there was a massive disconnect between her physical beauty and ugly personality? It made sense, so we discussed the matter a bit further and decided to ask Lola if she'd mind playing Luna's little sister. The meeting wasn't until Sunday, so we had plenty of time to get our act together.

Luna went back to work after that, and I was left a little unsure of what to do next. The sun was already getting low. If I went to the hidden dungeon, it would probably be dark by the time I got back. Still…

"I'm going! I want to see my master! And Dory too!"

It'd been a long time since I'd laid eyes on either of them, and I was sure that they'd be pleased to see me.

I went straight there, recited the dungeon's password, and headed inside. By then, I was used to taking out a few of the golden slimes that attacked me on my way in. The first time I'd killed one, I'd shot up a bunch of levels all at once. But I was so strong now that it barely even registered.

I headed down to the second floor and opened the door to Oliva's room quietly, planning to sneak up on her.

<Uuh…it hurts…>

It sounded like she was in a lot of pain. I stopped in my tracks.

<It's a little rough…today…>

She'd been bound in the same chains ever since I met her, and for a *really* long time before that too. Even though her eyes were closed, she must have realized that I was there, because she immediately snapped back into her usual, cheerful self.

<Just kidding! Did I fool you? Ah ha ha ha!>

But she was speaking more slowly than usual, and I could tell she was trembling. Olivia wasn't the kind of person easily ruffled, so this was no joke. Also, if she didn't want me to hear, why was she using telepathic communication?

I chewed that over, examining the Death Chains that bound her with my Discerning Eye for Items. They were S-Grade and designed to last as long as the target they were attached to. Olivia had already told me that she would die if they were severed, but I hadn't known they hurt her too.

"Master, have you been in pain all this time?" I asked.

<Still buying my little joke? Ha ha, you're so cute, Noir!>

Guess I wasn't going to get anywhere by questioning her. Clearly she didn't want to talk to me about it, so I dropped the topic for now. Olivia seemed to have the same idea.

<I'm more interested in talking about how you abandoned poor, sweet Olivia down here for ages and ages. You know, if you want to try out new fetishes, I'd rather do it in bed!>

"You haven't changed, I see. Honestly, I just ran into a lot of trouble on my trip. It wasn't personal."

<I want to hear all about it! Especially the one-night stands!>

Did she really think I was the sort of person who had one-night stands?!

In any case, I told her all about my trip, and we exchanged jokes about it. She seemed to enjoy the story, so I told her all about the situation with Iesu.

“Did I make the wrong choice?” I asked.

Olivia didn’t even have to think about it. *<There isn’t always a right choice or a wrong one. Sometimes it just depends on your own sense of justice. That said, I probably would have done the same as you. That is, if the Great Adventurer Olivia still possessed all of her faculties!>*

“Thanks!” I said, feeling the awkward lump in my throat dissolve.

I really was lucky to have her as my master.

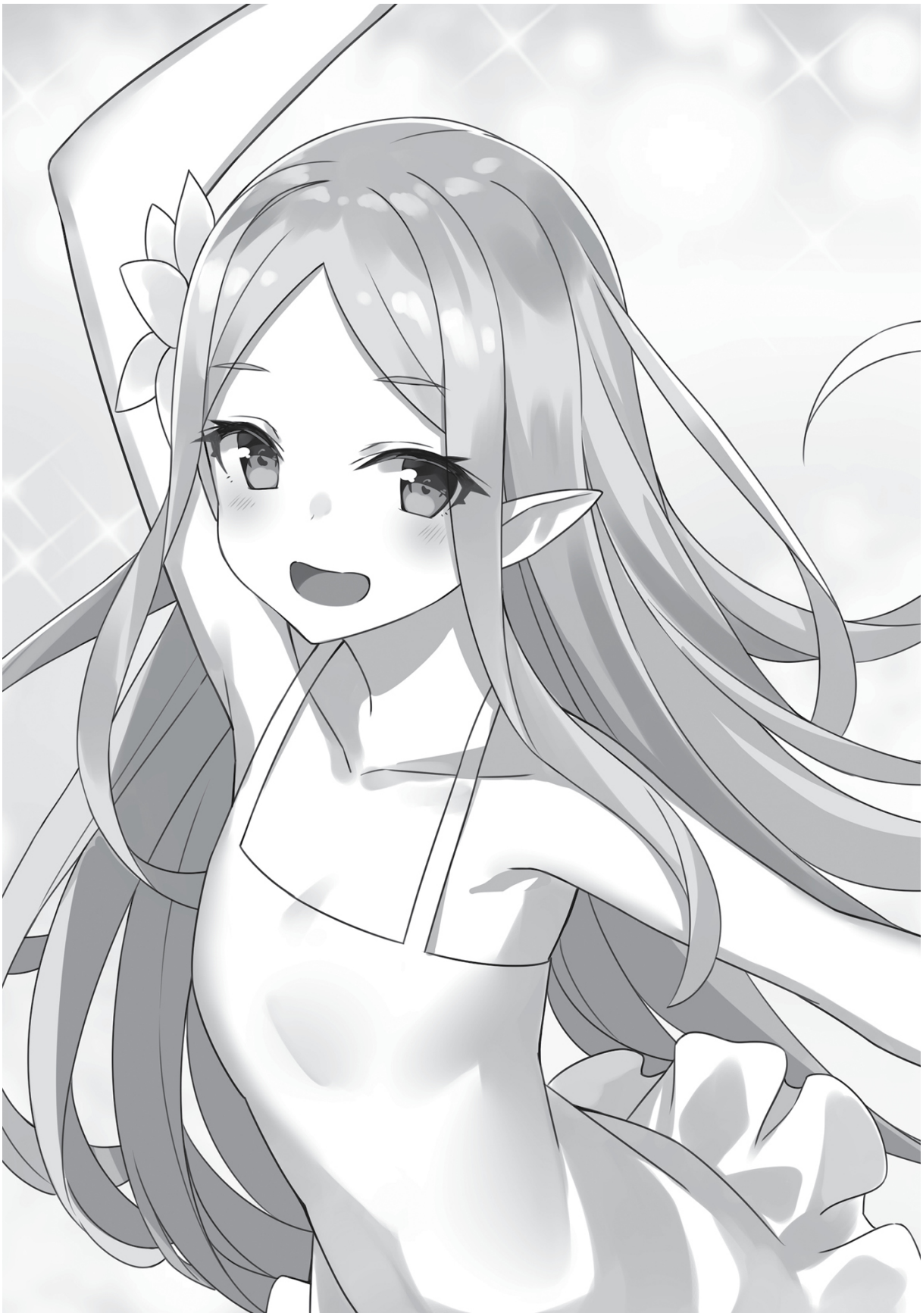
I promised to come back and visit again soon, then jumped in my Dungeon Elevator and headed down to the seventh floor to see Dory. The Dungeon Elevator skill was really handy, but it was frustrating that I had to wait an hour before I could use it again. I couldn’t even Edit the cooldown time on it; the LP cost was way too high.

When I reached the seventh floor, I slipped through the verdant green forest until I spotted a girl of about seven or eight with emerald-green hair.

“Dory! How have you been?”

“Noir! You came back!”

Dryade might have been a monster, but she was a kind and gentle soul with the appearance of a little girl. She ran over and took my hand, and we spun around like we were dancing.



I joined in, but it wasn’t long before I started feeling dizzy.

“Ugh…the world won’t stop spinning…”

“I’ll make the bad go away!”

Dory stroked my head and…actually, that *did* feel better. We spent the next hour walking lazily around the forest and catching up with each other. When it was time for me to go, she seemed to remember something important.

“Noir, there’s something I need to tell you.”

I nodded. “You can tell me anything.”

“A while ago…a strange monster started appearing here. Just every now and then.”

A strange monster? How curious.

“Can you tell me more about it?” I asked.

“It’s definitely a monster,” said Dory. “But it looks kinda like a person, riding on a red horse. The human part carries a sword and wears a metal mask. It comes through this tear that just sort of…appears in the air and looks around a bit. If it finds any monsters, it attacks them. Once, I saw it fight a pack of wolf monsters. It killed them all in seconds.”

“But you were okay, Dory?”

“Yes,” she said. “It saw me, but it didn’t seem interested. It left right away.”

Maybe it wasn’t interested because she looked like a little girl. Did monsters hold that kind of sentiment? Or maybe it was just interested in finding strong opponents to fight. Regardless, the fact that it had only started visiting recently was worrying. Did it have something to do with me exploring the dungeon?

“I’ll keep an eye out,” I said. “But promise me you won’t get anywhere near it if it shows up again.”

Dory nodded. “I promise.”

Happy with that, I gave her a pat on the head and left the dungeon.

By the time I got home, it was completely dark, and my family had already finished eating. I was often late coming home, so they knew to go ahead without me if I didn't show up for dinner.

"Noir, you're back," said Mother. "Let me get you something to eat."

"Yes," Father agreed. "I'll help you."

As I headed into the kitchen with them, I felt Alice glaring at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing."

Before I could ask any further, she turned her back on me and sulked upstairs. It was unusual for her to be so angry. Normally, she was the first to welcome me home.

I asked my parents and Tigerson what was going on with her, but none of them had any idea. Well, even Alice could have bad days. It was probably nothing. I was sure she'd be in a better mood the next morning.

The next day, I woke up sorely regretting my naivety. I ran into Alice as I was leaving my room and reached out to put my hand on her shoulder, but she pulled away.

"Don't touch me!"

"S-sorry."

"Why are you like this?!" she snapped. "You really don't think about anyone but yourself, do you?"

"Um, I'm really sorry if I've done something to upset you."

"Are you?" she demanded. "If you were *really* sorry, you'd lock yourself in a nice safe room and never come out."

She wanted me to become a shut-in? I didn't understand, but she seemed really mad. I didn't think I'd ever seen her that angry before. After breakfast, she headed straight out to school. I left the house to do the same, feeling dejected.

“Good morning!” Emma shouted, running up to me with a big smile on her face. “Let’s get going!”

I still hadn’t mastered the art of keeping my eyes off her chest when she ran.

“My eyes are up here, dummy!” Emma tilted my head up and flashed me another smile. At least she seemed to be in a good mood today.

“Hey… What about my LP?”

“Oh! Right!”

Emma hugged me tightly, just like she did every morning. But this time, it seemed to last longer than normal. I was glad for it, but it was a little embarrassing standing there in the middle of the street with everyone staring.

“I wish Alice were as happy as you are,” I said when Emma finally let me go.

“Is she mad at you? That’s odd.”

I nodded feebly.

“It’s probably just because you’re always putting yourself in danger, Noir. Alice just wants you to be safe.”

She was probably right. Emma was so perceptive about things like that. I mean, Alice had been really happy when I got home, but I guess once she had some time to think about it, she’d probably realized just how dangerous my adventure had been.

“I guess I’ll have to talk to her.”

“Yeah. Hang in there, ah ha ha ha ha ha!”

I smiled. “You’re excitable today. Why don’t we hold hands? Like we did when we were kids.”

Emma agreed at once, and we walked the rest of the way to school like that. Apparently, Emma was in such a good mood because she’d found a four-leaf clover. According to superstition, that meant she’d find happiness with the person she loved.

“I guess that’s what makes girls happy, huh?”

But as soon as I said it, I knew it wasn't right. After all, "happiness in love" would hardly make my master Olivia happy—she wasn't the type to devote all her love and energy to one person. Perhaps living in freedom was her idea of happiness? If that was the case, being trapped in those chains had to be hell for her.

"Emma, I'm going to call on the Great Sage. Will you help me if I get a headache?"

"Of course. What are you going to ask?"

"I want to know about the awful chains that my master's been caught in all this time."

Great Sage, I wish to break the Death Chains in the Infinite Labyrinth. Is there a way to destroy them without killing Olivia?

<I believe there is a way to achieve your goal on the fifteenth floor.>

You believe? Tell me, Sage, how does it work?

<I do not know.>

Ouch. Yeah, okay, that was enough for now. The more difficult the question I asked, the more pain I tended to suffer as a result. If I hadn't made myself an immunity skill, the pain right then would have been awful. More importantly, it was concerning that not even the Great Sage had an answer for me.

Emma saw the pain on my face. She leaned in and pressed her lips against mine. "Guess it was a tricky question, huh?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "But at least I got a lead."

It might not have been a firm answer, but it had *something* to do with the fifteenth floor. Or at least, that was what the Great Sage believed. But the Sage wasn't omniscient or infallible. I had to remember not to rely on it too heavily.

Still, I'd already reached the twelfth floor in the hidden dungeon, so the fifteenth wasn't far. At the same time, the thought of all those weapons scattered about on the twelfth floor made my head hurt a little. Going back there would be more than a little scary.

The school day passed normally enough, without anything strange or unusual.

“Come on, you louts! You’ve been slacking over the summer, haven’t you?! When will you learn the only thing you can depend on is your own body?!”

Was Ms. Elena’s training getting harsher? It sure felt that way. We were running laps around the schoolyard while she smacked anyone who fell behind on the ass. By the time we were done, about half the class had thrown up, but Ms. Elena wasn’t finished.

“Now I want you to run out, run back, pick up a bow, and fire it at the target.”

It was easy enough to hit long-range targets with archery, but in an actual combat situation, you were often running around at the same time, trying to find a gap in your enemy’s defenses. We did as she said, taking turns to perform the exercise. I watched the first boy in our group run a short lap, pick up the bow, and fire the arrow, panting for breath all the way. The arrow flew up into the sky and disappeared, but Ms. Elena was giving us two chances, so he tried again.

“Zero points. Next!”

“Ow!”

As the boy slumped away, she kicked him in the rump and turned to us. We were all terrified of her, but she had some words of encouragement.

“Remember that I’m going easy on you. In a real fight, you get one shot or you’re dead, so take this seriously! Noir Stardia, you’re next!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I ran my lap, picked up the bow, and drew it. I sucked down a deep breath to steady my hands.

I’ve got this. I can hit a target at ten yards. No problem. I just need to stay calm.

Aaaand…bullseye!

“It hit?!” I gaped. I couldn’t quite believe it.

“Noir, have you been training in secret?” asked one of my classmates.

“You even nailed it right in the center. I don’t believe it,” said another.

I felt a little embarrassed by all the praise. Probably best not to mention that I’d acquired S-Grade Archery on my trip. Even Ms. Elena looked surprised.

“You cleared it in one try. You really have grown over your break.”

“Well, I did go through a lot…”

And I’d encountered a lot of strong people.

Ms. Elena nodded. “Lie on your back and accept your reward.”

I couldn’t exactly refuse, so I did as I was told. As soon as I was on the ground, Ms. Elena sat on my chest and ground circles against me. It was a little painful, but I earned 300 LP from it, so it was more or less a reward after all.

I wasn’t exactly sure how to react to the jealous stares from all the boys in my class, or the disgusted glares I got from the girls. In the end, I developed the utterly useless skill of half-smiling and half-frowning at the same time.

When I explained Luna’s predicament, Lola was adamant about playing the role of little sister. It was settled: next Sunday, we would try to ruin Luna’s reputation in front of this guy in any way we could.

Once we got that figured out, I headed back to the hidden dungeon to explore. First off, I snuck quietly into my master’s room, but I didn’t hear her talking that day. Was she suffering in silence?

<I never knew you were a Peeping Tom, Noir.>

I sighed. “You caught me, huh?”

<Don’t feel bad. Your dear sweet Olivia is just extra *sensitive to your presence.>*

“Master, I want you to know something: I’m going to release you from those chains, no matter what. I don’t want you to suffer anymore.”

I owed her that much, at least. She’d changed my life since we’d met, and not just with the skills she’d given me. Knowing her was slowly transforming me into someone capable of changing his life, no matter how much of a coward I was.

Olivia fell silent for a few moments, then started sobbing.

<Ooh, I’ve never been…so glad…to be alive…uuuhhh…>

I didn’t know how to respond.

<Waaaaahhh!>

“You’re messing with me, aren’t you?” I sighed. “I’m here trying to be serious, and this is how you repay me?”

<Ah ha ha ha! Oh, come on! It is *pretty funny. Especially because you were so weak when you came here. I mean, you still* are *weak, but…>*

All right, all right. Point taken. I knew I was developing slower than a turtle, and I wasn’t as audacious as my master, so I hadn’t even been able to save up much LP. But when I started to sulk, Olivia became more serious.

<I am *happy that you care about me so much, Noir. But you know the one thing that I absolutely do* not *want?>*

I shook my head.

<For you to die, stupid! What I mean is: Don’t push yourself too hard, okay?>

“Got it. Besides, you know what kind of person I am.”

<Sure do! You’re the sort of boy who spends ages gathering as much information as he can on the girl he likes, then never admits to his feelings and cries himself to sleep while another man sweeps her off her feet.>

“Ouch! No need to be so mean about it!”

Olivia laughed heartily, and the cheer in her voice eased my nerves somehow. I took one last look at her, bound up in those awful chains, before taking my leave and summoning the Dungeon Elevator.

Just like before, the twelfth floor was covered in discarded weapons. I still couldn't figure out what was going on, but the sight was disconcerting. The room itself wasn't so different from the one Olivia was trapped in, with a single door at the back leading further into the dungeon. I was sure the real challenge was on the other side of that door, but I couldn't go through it without selecting one of the weapons.

What made it worse was that the weapons themselves *would not* shut up.

<Hey! You're back! You'll pick me this time, won't you, buddy?>

<No, I insist that you pick me.>

<I thought we agreed to play fair!>

<Fuchonheraza, fuchonherami!>

They spoke in all sorts of different voices: a confident man, a young woman, an ill-tempered one, and one that spoke in some indecipherable language. There were forty-eight weapons in total, and I didn't have time to interrogate them. The best thing to do would be to narrow them down to the ones I could actually use. A sword or a bow would probably be best, but that still left more than ten of them. I tried using Discerning Eye for Items, but none of them were particularly rare or had any special skills, so I just lined the ten of them up in front of me to question them.

"I've already destroyed plenty of weapons in my time," I said. "If you displease me, I'll destroy you too."

It was Oliva who'd suggested threatening them, and it seemed to work. Most of them shut up. Seemed they really didn't want to be destroyed. One of them was still particularly strong-willed.

<What do I care?! If it's a choice between rotting down here for eternity or having you destroy me, I'll take the latter!>

The weapon that spoke was an unpretentious double-edged blade. It was just the right size for me.

"What's on the other side of that door?" I asked.

They all answered at once. Apparently, there were monsters on the other side, as expected, but there were also a lot of traps. Unfortunately, none of them knew the particulars.

“How do you know about the traps?”

<*Because the dungeon made us.*>

“So, in that case, there’s a good chance you might betray me.”

<*No!*> said the ill-tempered sword. <*I ain’t loyal to this damned dungeon. I don’t even know that much about it!*>

It sounded like he was telling the truth, although I’d have to be sure not to let my guard down. I went ahead and picked him up.

<*What? Why me?*> He sounded surprised.

“Because you’re the right size, and because you’re not trying to flatter me or win me over.”

<*Hell yeah!*>

He seemed really happy to have been picked, at least. Since we were going to be working together, I figured I’d better introduce myself.

“I’m Noir, by the way.”

<*I ain’t got a name, kid. Call me whatever you like.*>

“Okay, so how about Noname?”

It wouldn’t win any prizes for inventiveness, but the sword didn’t seem to care.

Gripping Noname in one hand, I took the door handle in the other and pulled. It had been sealed shut before, but now it opened easily. It turned out the weapons were right, and I needed one of them to move on.

The door opened into an normal-looking corridor that branched off just ahead of us. I couldn’t see any monsters yet, but Noname was average as swords went, so I made sure I had my favorite double-edged sword at my hip, just in case.

We advanced cautiously toward the first fork in the path, and when we reached it, I decided to turn right. I kept heading in, keeping close to the wall.

<*Whoa!*> Noname shouted. <*I have a bad feeling about this place!*>

“What do you mean a bad—whoa!”

Before I could finish, something grabbed my shirt. I panicked, casting around to work out what was going on, and found several earth-colored arms growing straight out of the wall, pulling me close.

What the hell? That's disgusting!

I didn't even have time to cry out. The wall was unnaturally warm. It sucked me straight into it.

"Ow…"

Before I knew what was happening, I found myself in a room on the other side. It had a thick, dirt floor and no way out.

I started by checking the wall I'd come in through, but it was solid now. Still, I had a mallet with the Stone Crusher skill in my arsenal, so I tried using it on the wall. It didn't even leave a mark.

<*It's a trap*,> said Noname.

"I guess it is."

<*Look.*>

Plop…plop…plop…

Things were coming out of the ground, one after another. They were humanoid in shape, but their bodies were made entirely out of mud. I used my Discerning Eye on the one closest to me.

Name: Mudman

Level: 189

Skill: Bodily Reformation; Bodily Assimilation

I understood the reformation skill well enough, but what did Bodily Assimilation do? Did it only work on allies, or was I a potential target too? Either way, it sounded annoying. There were six of them now. Each of them was a different level, but they were all around Level 200. But just as things were looking bleak, Noname gave me some encouragement.

<*Don't be afraid! Use me! I'll cut them down!*>

“But they can just put themselves back together again!”

<Who cares? Do it!>

It was strange being yelled at by my own sword, but I did as he said—swinging the blade at the mudmen. They were thicker and heavier than I’d expected, and it was tough to get the sword all the way through, but I was strong enough now to cut the first one in half with my first hit.

The other mudmen stretched out their arms, trying to pull me in, but I couldn’t let that happen. If they caught me, I was pretty certain they’d absorb me, and I didn’t want to know what would happen then! I back stepped away and started taking them out one at a time.

Just as I’d expected, by the time I destroyed the sixth one, the first and second ones had reformed themselves. I had a look into destroying the skill in question, but it would cost over 7,000 LP to break them all. I had just about enough LP to do that, but I really didn’t want to waste it if there was another way.

Thankfully, the mudmen themselves were slow and weak. So long as I didn’t get exhausted in a drawn-out battle, I could figure a way through this.

I smashed the revived mudmen back into the ground, but I started to get the feeling that something was off. Not in a bad way, though. The mud just felt…softer? Like it was easier to cut them down now.

<This is the stuff! I feel so alive!>

I took a moment to use Discerning Eye on Noname and was shocked to discover he’d somehow picked up the Sharp Edge skill. What in the…? I was sure he hadn’t had any skills earlier. I wasn’t exactly complaining though!

The mudmen kept coming back to life, and I kept on destroying them. When I checked Noname’s skills again, he’d acquired C-Grade Destructive Edge as well. Now I really needed to look into things.

Destructive Edge: Increases blade’s ability to destroy materials while also making the blade more prone to breaking.

Well, that seemed useful, although I didn't like the idea of the blade becoming more prone to breaking. All the same, it looked like Noname really was getting stronger. Maybe he got better with each enemy I defeated?

<*More! More! I'm getting more powerful!*>

"Hang on, I need to think about this."

If that Destructive Edge skill got him killed, I really *would* be in trouble. Although, the way things were going, maybe the skill would upgrade itself.

Urgh, these mudmen were so annoying! I fired off a Water Drop, drenching them through. Their muddy bodies absorbed the water, making them even slower. Perfect! At least that gave me some more time to think as I kicked them around the room.

I supposed I could use Editor to get rid of Destructive Edge, but the skill would probably just develop again. Making the blade stronger seemed like the better option, so I spent 2,000 LP to create the S-Grade Enduring Edge skill and another 1,200 LP to Bestow it on Noname. That still left me with about 5,000 LP.

I needed to find a way out of this room! I kept cutting down the sluggish mudmen, and Noname kept developing at an astonishing rate. In no time at all, he was an A-Grade weapon. I was almost afraid to think it but…wasn't this all a little too easy? I had a sneaking suspicion that there might be some kind of catch. Although it was possible I'd just lucked out when I picked Noname.

<*Yesssss!*>

And with that, he hit S-Grade. Strangely, my level hadn't gone up at all. Maybe because I hadn't defeated any of the mudmen yet? Then again, I wasn't sure that I *could*.

"It's time to get out of here."

I turned back to the wall we'd come in through and swung Noname as hard as I could.

Fwoooomp!

The wall collapsed almost right away. We'd done it! I hurried out of the room and back into the corridor.

<Hey! Those things are still alive!>

"There's nothing I can do about that. They just keep coming back!"

Noname grumbled, dissatisfied with my answer, but I ignored him. Once we'd put some distance between us and that room, I glanced back over my shoulder, but the mudmen didn't seem to be following us. They probably couldn't leave the room. Good news!

I headed straight back down the middle of the corridor, careful to avoid any more arms that came out of the wall. We reached a three-way fork in the path, and each of them had different noises coming from them: moans, beastly howls, and extremely high-pitched shrieks.

<No matter which way you go, there are so many monsters. I can't wait!>

"Yeah…my heart's pounding too…"

Only mine was beating so fast because I was anxious. I had to pick a direction, but there was no guarantee where any of them would take me.

<Just take the middle one! Hurry up!>

"Fine!"

I did as Noname suggested. The corridor ahead was clear and well lit. I was just starting to think that there was nothing there when…

"Grrrr!"

A beast suddenly shot past us. It looked like a brown bear, but it was clearly a monster. It was massive and extremely quick, and it had a fifth leg growing out of its back. It turned and reached us before I'd even had time to fire off a spell. Faster than I could track, it swiped at me with a thick, fur-covered leg.

This thing was strong, and human faces are frail. Before it could rip me to shreds, I rolled out of the way. Once I was clear, I tried to slash the creature's back, but the extra leg moved swiftly to block me. I skipped out of the way again, but not before it caught me with its claws. I was bleeding, but it wasn't a deep wound. I shouldn't have gone in without a plan.

<Ooooh, a real challenge! This is great!>

Hold your horses, Noname! I needed to figure out how to deal with this thing. It was strong and could cover its back easily. Any attack I made would have to be decisive.

I started by using Magical Fusion to combine Stone Bullet with Holy Flame. The burning stone slammed into the creature, setting its fur on fire. The flames were persistent too. The bear ran around, slamming into the walls and trying to put out the fire, but it was useless. All I had to do was wait, and victory would be mine.

<Use me! Quickly! Cut it down!>

"We don't need to. All we have to do is wait."

<Are you crazy? What's the point if we don't kill it ourselves?! Cut! Cut! Cut! Cut! Cut! Cut! Cut!>

Wow, this guy was annoying. But, well, even if his shouting was kinda intimidating, using him on the bear would make him stronger, so I waited for an opportunity and attacked. The blade cut into the bear's neck, bringing a swift end to a rather underwhelming fight.

When I checked Noname again, he had the skill Flame Blade. He really was getting stronger! The new skill would allow me to use my magic to set him on fire. Whoa, that was super cool!

<Love it. You might be the ideal partner for me, Noir.>

"I just wish you'd stop yelling so much."

<Sorry. But the more enemies we defeat, the easier it'll get for you, right?>

He had a point. And I *did* want him to get stronger. I just didn't want to take any unnecessary risks.

I investigated the path behind the bear monster, but it was a dead end. We had to turn back and try one of the other forks. There, we found a single humanoid monster that was so weak, we killed it in a second, and a red crow that was making the shrieking sound I'd heard before. It was only about Level 5 and didn't have any notable skills, but it did fly around a lot and attack me with its beak. I tried setting fire to Noname, but the crow was

pretty skilled at getting out of the way. If I couldn't beat it, it was time to back off.

<You just have to hit it once. Throw me!>

"Roger that."

I launched the flaming sword into the air, but my aim was a little off. All the same, it managed to contact one of the crow's wings, and that was enough. Its feathers ignited, and a few seconds later, it had burned to death.

<I think…I got stronger again…>

He was right. Now he had the skill Wave Slash too. This one would let me use my magic to fire off a blast of cutting wind. I tried it out and found I could adjust the amount of energy to control the strength of the attacks—reaching anything from five to twenty yards. As long as I had some magic left, that would be useful. Unfortunately, the third path was a dead end too.

"Maybe I made the wrong choice right at the beginning."

Guess we'd have to go all the way back to the first fork again. This time, I took the other branch, but the enemies down there were almost identical. At least this time I had Wave Slash. It was a cakewalk, really. I took them all out at a distance and without any trouble, but it was exhausting to find another set of dead ends.

"Maybe the stairs to the next level are hidden."

<Seems likely. I just wish there was a more powerful enemy to fight!>

I retraced my steps, tapping the walls with my sword as I went.

Tnk, tnk, tnk, tnk, tnk, tnk, dnk.

Dnk.

Yep, I'd definitely found a spot that sounded different. I smashed through the wall and peered through the open hole. There was some kind of stone plinth inside with a wooden sign next to it…and nothing else. No monsters. No living creatures of any kind. I entered cautiously, keeping my eyes peeled for traps as I approached the sign.

Place a strengthened weapon on the plinth.

"I guess that means you, Noname."

<So this is goodbye, huh?>

“Maybe. But I don’t see the stairs anywhere.”

<They’ll probably appear once you set me down on that thing.>

I guess… The plinth *was* just the right size for a single weapon, and I didn’t see anything else suspicious. Nothing else for it.

<Looks like you passed. Bye, kid.>

“Huh?”

The moment I put Noname down, he was absorbed into the plinth. Before I could say goodbye back, he was gone. The walls began to move, opening up a path to some stairs leading down.

“I guess I cleared it… But Noname had to…”

He’d grown so strong, it felt like such a waste. But he’d *needed* to get that strong to open the path. The infinitely regenerating mudmen must have been put on this floor specifically to strengthen the weapons.

Uh… But I still had a really bad feeling about it, even though I couldn’t work out why.

I descended the stairs anxiously. When I reached the next floor, the walls and ceilings were made of metal, and one straight path led forward. It was gloomy down there, but I could see a strong light at the end of the hall. Things seemed to open up back there.

Was it some kind of arena? I heard a large crowd murmuring, although the chances of the crowd being human seemed extremely low.

“I think this is far enough for today.”

I was already exhausted, so it was best not to push my luck.

I summoned the Dungeon Elevator and headed back up to the surface.

Chapter 5:
The Blind Date and the Arena

AS USUAL, it was night by the time I got out of the dungeon, and I hurried home with the moon at my back. There were a lot of drunks out on the street tonight, and I was glad to get away from them.

"I'm home!"

I got back just in time for dinner and hurried into the living room to find food was still on the table, but something was wrong. After a moment, I realized that my sister wasn't there.

"Is Alice upstairs?"

"No," Father said, sounding worried. "She's still not home. It's very strange."

Mother and Tigerson looked concerned too. Alice usually helped with dinner, and it was strange for her not to be home yet.

"Father, you didn't peep on her while she was changing, did you?"

"What?! I would never do such a thing! I have never looked at my daughter in that way!"

"You haven't, huh? So I guess she started hating taking baths with you because…"

<*I think we cannot rule it out*,> said Tigerson.

"I'm innocent!" Father protested. "There has to be some other reason why she isn't home yet! Maybe she got distracted by a boy she likes and they're—wait. Where's my sword?!"

If I didn't do something soon, he'd start swinging it around and making a fool of himself again. Granted, I didn't think he'd do anything if Alice *did* have a boyfriend. He'd probably be happy for her. If it was true, at least.

"I'm pretty sure this is my fault," I said. "I'm going to look for her."

It was obvious she'd been unhappy with me since I got back. Tigerson volunteered to help with the search, but I needed to do this alone. If I could find her, maybe she'd tell me what was wrong.

I hurried outside and checked all the places I thought she could be: the town square, the park, shops, school… But half an hour later, Alice was still nowhere to be found. By then, it was about eight o'clock, so there were still a ton of people on the streets. Would I notice her in the crowd, even if she was nearby?

My only real option was to ask the Great Sage.

<She is approximately 230 yards straight ahead.>

That close?!

I hurried on and found her straight away. Unfortunately, she wasn't alone. There were three rather crude-looking men with her.

"Has she really fallen in with such a bad crowd?!"

But on closer inspection, she didn't seem very happy to be there. They had to be hassling her, so I decided to follow. A few moments later, the four of them entered a small pub on a deserted street.

"I think this place is out of business."

There was still a sign hanging outside, but it was ragged and uncared for. This didn't seem the kind of place where Alice belonged at all.

I opened the door and walked inside to find what looked like a normal pub. There were tables and a bar, but the people were shady as hell. There were five or six other guys after the three Alice had come in with. There were a few women too.

"What're you doin' here, boy?" one of the men asked, approaching me.

Alice finally looked up and noticed me. "Brother?!"

"He's your brother? Wouldn't have guessed that!"

Well, sorry for not having Alice's perfect skin and sparkling eyes!

"It's late," I said to Alice. "What are you doing here?"

"Um…these people…they made me…"

I knew it! Looking at the bar again, I saw some dried plants that could be used to dull the senses. Alice was in real trouble! I grabbed her hand and started walking out.

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

“I don’t think so, buddy,” said one of the men.

He and his friends had us surrounded. The only way out was through them but, when I used my Discerning Eye, they were all a lot stronger than I’d expected. Some of them were even over Level 50, and two or three had some worrying skills. If they attacked us all at once, I wasn’t sure I could beat them.

“What are you, a student?” one of them asked.

“Yes, at the Hero Academy.”

“What, are you kidding me?!”

The Hero Academy was mostly reserved for the elite. They didn’t expect someone as scruffy-looking as me to study there. How rude! I wasn’t going to stand for that.

“I’m in S-Class,” I told them.

“That’s it! I call bullshit!”

They all roared with laughter. Maybe it would be better just to roll with it, but Alice was getting mad.

“My brother’s not only in S-Class,” she said. “He’s at the top of it! So stop making fun of him!!”

“Is that right?” said the man. “Guess we’ll just have to find out for ourselves, right, boys?” He picked up an apple and stared at me while he crushed it in his hand. The juice dribbled down his arm and dripped onto the floor. It wasn’t only ridiculous—it was a waste of a perfectly good apple! But the others were all smirking, and Apple Juice Guy threw another one to me. “Should be a piece of cake, right?”

“Sure,” I said, crushing the apple completely.

I mean, I didn’t have superhuman strength like Lola, but this was child’s play. Even so, the men didn’t look all that impressed.

So why did you get me to do it, then?!

“All right, buddy,” said Apple Juice Guy. “Why don’t we have a little bout?”

He handed me a wooden sword, which was considerate. Guess he wanted to avoid the murder charges. A quick check revealed that he *did* have a swordsmanship skill, but it was only the C-Grade version. He stepped toward me, puffed up with confidence.

I smiled. “Stand back, Alice.”

“Noir, I’m so sorry that I got you into this!”

“Don’t worry about it! It’s my job to protect my little sister, after all.”

I patted her on the head and got into position while the other men moved the furniture out of the way.

Name: Kanakari Tohrah

Age: 22

Species: Human

Level: 63

Occupation: Dream Herb Dealer

Skills: Swordsmanship (Grade C); Improved Lunge

His stats were impressive for someone so young, especially since he wasn’t an adventurer. If he cleaned up his act and stopped selling drugs, he could probably have a successful life. Either way, I wasn’t intimidated.

He pointed his wooden sword up at the ceiling and charged—closing the space between us with a single step. Pretty dang cool. He had Improved Lunge to thank for that. That said, his swordsmanship left a lot to be desired, and I calmly parried his attack away.

“Whoa!”

Apple Juice had too much forward momentum to stop himself. When I parried his attack, he lost balance, leaving himself wide open. I gave his hand a firm whack with my wooden sword, making him drop his weapon.

“Convinced yet?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, rubbing his hand. “But now I want to fight for real.”

Seemed practice swords just weren’t exciting enough for him. But I was confident enough that I could manage just as well with the real thing. The onlookers goaded him on, but I had no interest in continuing with this charade. I quickly made the Explode skill and Bestowed it on his wooden sword, which promptly blew up. Everyone’s eyes suddenly doubled in size.

“What the hell just happened?!”

“Why did it just—”

“Because I did it,” I said. “Now stop wasting my time and get out of my way.”

I kept my voice flat and calm, playing the coolheaded badass. The men muttered to each other.

“Still want to go a round with real swords?” I asked. “I’m warning you: your head will end up on one of them.”

“I, uhh…” Apple Juice stammered. “I have a stomachache. Why don’t one of you do it?”

Just like that, his fighting spirit melted away and he tried to pass the task off onto one of the others. Only, for some reason, none of them seemed interested either.

“All right, then,” I said. “Now I’m going to take my sister and leave. Any objections?”

“G-go right ahead…”

Suddenly, everyone was so considerate and polite! I smiled as Alice and I headed out together. As soon as we were outside, I stopped to make sure she wasn’t injured.

“No, I’m okay. Nobody touched me. Sorry for the trouble, Brother Dearest.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “No trouble at all. So were you late for dinner because you got caught up with those guys?”

“N-no…I was talking to Ms. Lola about something.”

“Lola? What did you guys talk about?”

“Well, um…”

What was I thinking? Of course a girl of her age wouldn’t want to tell her brother all about her troubles. Maybe it had something to do with Alice’s coldness toward me, but I needed to be more delicate.

For now, we needed to head home. Everyone would be worried about us. A long silence hung between us as we walked. Things had never been like this before. Maybe I couldn’t find out what was going on, but I at least wanted to apologize.

“Alice, I’m sorry for whatever I’ve done to hurt your feelings. I really am.”

“You haven’t! I mean, you haven’t done anything wrong, Brother!” she cried, sounding pained. “It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

I was about to ask her why when we ran into Father, riding on Tigerson’s back.

“There you are!” he cried. “Look, Tigerson! There they are!”

<Indeed. And they appear unharmed. What a relief.>

“Alice,” said Father. “Did I do something to upset you? Did my socks stink too much? Was the bath dirty? Please, don’t abandon your poor father!”

And here we were again, with him making a fool of himself in the middle of the street. Fortunately, Alice and I had lots of experience in dealing with this sort of situation. We pretended that we didn’t know him and headed back into the house.

I still wanted to ask her what was happening, but when we were back, we didn’t get a moment alone together and I never got the chance.

The next morning, I was awoken by a strange presence in my room.

“Alice…?”

She was staring out my window, looking sad.

“Sorry for waking you up so early, Brother.”

I shook my head and got out of bed. “You want to talk about what happened yesterday, I’m guessing?”

“Yes. Listen, Brother, I was mad because, well, because I don’t want you to put yourself in danger anymore.”

Guess Emma was right after all.

I listened quietly as Alice told me her worries. How I kept going to places where one wrong step could kill me, and how much she wanted to beg me never to do it again. Eventually, the thought of how much danger I was in had made her angry with me.

“Sorry, Alice,” I said. “You’re right. I really have been doing a lot of dangerous things…”

Alice shook her head. “No. You haven’t done anything wrong. I was being unreasonable. Talking to Ms. Lola yesterday helped me realize that.”

Thank you, Lola!

“Your life is your own,” Alice went on. “And even if that comes with risk, it often comes with greater returns too, right?”

“Exactly!” I agreed. “Like right now, I’m trying to get stronger. That’s why I’m exploring the hidden dungeon.”

I was still a coward, but thanks to meeting my master, I had developed the spirit of adventure. Apparently, my father had been like that too, so perhaps it was in my blood. Or maybe I was just growing up. In truth, maybe it was a little of both.

“I know you’re going to be someone special, Brother. And I’m going to support you in any way I can. So please…let me apologize for how I’ve been acting.”

Before I could tell her that she didn’t need to apologize, Alice grabbed hold of her skirt and lifted it up.

Wait, Alice! I don’t want to see your underwear!

But I couldn’t help it. She was wearing cute pink panties today and they were—no, wait. What was wrong with me?!

“I-I’m so sorry…” Alice mumbled, flushing bright red and turning away from me.

That gesture was oddly familiar. Hadn’t I seen someone do this before?

“Did Lola tell you to do this?” I asked.

Alice fidgeted. “She said it was the best way to apologize to you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That information is false.”

“B-but…she said it would help you earn LP.”

As if I would earn any LP from—wait. I’d got over 600?! That was more than I got when Lola did it! I hurriedly pulled Alice’s skirt back down. Alice left, face tinged with embarrassment, and let me get back to sleep.

I really needed to have a little chat with Lola.

Normally, I spent my Sunday mornings relaxing, but this was not one of those days. Today, I was out in the yard, swinging my sword as hard as I could. The skills my master had given me had made me much stronger, but there was one I had developed all on my own: C-Grade Swordsmanship. I guess all the time I’d spent swinging a sword about must have done the trick.

I would probably have to put in at least as much effort to learn a martial arts skill unless I wanted to make something with Get Creative. It gave me more respect for all the strong people I’d met so far—strength that they’d built up from hard work, morning to night. Slowly, I felt my swings and parries getting sharper. I really wanted to keep improving my swordsmanship with my own strength. After all, I needed *something* to challenge me. And besides, there were things that you couldn’t improve just by buying a skill up.

That said, Improved Lunge and Improved Side Step would probably be useful for whatever fights awaited me on the thirteenth floor, so I decided to buy them for myself. They only cost 300 and 200 LP respectively.

“Brother?” Alice called from the house. “Ms. Lola and Ms. Luna are here to see you!”

“Okay! Tell them I’m just going to get changed!”

I got out of my sweaty clothes and put on something more respectable, then headed downstairs to meet them. Luna seemed unhappy, but at least Lola was her normal cheery self.

“Goooood morning, Mr. Noir! You’re looking very cute today!”

“One day, Lola, I’ll get you to call me ‘handsome.’”

“Bah! You’re already handsome.”

She really did have a talent for stroking your ego. No wonder she was such a popular receptionist—some of those guys would work themselves to death just to see her smile.

Still, Luna was our heroine for today.

“Feeling nervous?” I asked her.

“Y-yeah. I’ve never been very good at stuff like this.”

“Well, we’re going to be right there to back you up. Shall we get going?”

We had one job today, and one job only: make Luna look as bad as possible, and make sure that she never had to see this guy again.

We’d arranged to meet at eleven in front of a fancy restaurant that was popular with the nobility. My friends and I arrived a few minutes early.

“Even the aristocracy have to make reservations here!” Lola said excitedly. “Let’s eat everything we can!”

She locked arms with me, but I shook my head.

“We can’t get distracted from our mission. We need to make sure we convince this guy that Luna is a terrible person.”

Luna sighed. “I know it’s just an act, but it still hurts.”

I patted her arm. “Remember, it’s all just pretend.”

At least Lola and I had been over the plan plenty of times already. We’d thought of everything we could that would turn a guy off.

At eleven o’clock, right on the dot, a carriage came down the street and stopped in front of the restaurant. As we watched, two men got out, one of them in his mid-twenties and the other one much older. The older man looked us all over as though he were appraising us. A consummate merchant as ever. Before long, his eyes fell on Luna.

Luna nodded.

The younger man made a strange noise and ran over to her. “Oooooh! You’re an elf! You even have pointy ears!”

He jumped up and down like a child. Honestly, it was a little creepy. He was handsome though. Rich too. A lot of women would probably be swayed by that.

“I’m Jonathan,” said the older man. “Founder of Torill Trading. And this is my son, Sopan.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Sopan. “But let’s not stand around chatting outside like the poors. Daddy, let’s go inside.”

Daddy?! I almost burst out laughing, and I could see Lola’s nose twitching too. We absolutely…could not…laugh. I had to pinch myself to hold it back. Lola seemed to be holding her breath.

“Hnn…”

Careful, Lola. Please don’t make yourself pass out.

“What are you two doing?” Jonathan asked.

“N-nothing, Dadd—Mr. Jonathan!”

Oh, no! Now I’d nearly done it too! Was it infectious?!

I was still covering my face as we went inside the fancy restaurant and a well-dressed employee escorted us to our dining room. It had tatami floors and a long table in the middle, already set with drinks. I figured they’d bring the food in later.

We sat down opposite each other, and I started to feel nervous.

“I believe you’re already aware of this,” said Jonathan. “But my son is looking for a wife.”

“Daddy! This is my date! Let *me* handle it!”

“O-oh, certainly,” said Jonathan. “I’ll hold my tongue.”

Sopan immediately launched into a long-winded and self-indulgent introduction. “I, Sopan, am seeking a most virtuous and obedient wife! She must be beautiful and love me for all of eternity!”

He really was taking this seriously! Honestly, Luna looked quite taken aback, but before we could say anything, Sopan went on and on into his personal history. He’d started working as a merchant when he was fifteen and boasted that he had quite the income now. Was he hoping that his fortune would help to persuade Luna?

“The fact that you work as a cleric clearly shows that your personality isn’t an issue,” said Sopan. “And anyone with eyes would agree that you’re beautiful. To top it all off, you’re a half-elf, so you won’t age either. You’re absolutely *perfect*!”

“Actually,” Luna said quietly. “Elves do age. The physical signs just appear more slowly than they do in humans.”

“But you shall remain beautiful for as long as I’m alive!”

Elves looked twenty-something well into their second or third century, so he wasn’t wrong about that. But Luna was starting to look frustrated. It was time for Lola and I to spring into action. I stifled a laugh.

“Okay, but…obedient? My sister?! I don’t think she even knows what that means…”

Lola nudged me playfully. “Right? And virtuous? Could you call her that? I mean, she beat us both up only yesterday!”

Sopan and his father froze.

“I…I think that’s enough, Noir,” Sopan managed at last. “Today is for Luna and I to get to know each other.”

“Really?” I snorted. “All I’m saying is that it’s your funeral, buddy. I mean, she’s always lazing around the house, eating and sleeping and ordering us around. And then there’s the revolving door of strange men coming in and out…”

“Strange men?!” Jonathan spluttered. “What are you talking about?”

He looked more concerned than Sopan about this, but it looked like we'd hit a nerve. Time to keep pushing.

"Oh, there's always these sketchy men coming in and out with packages. She says it's medical supplies, but I think it's…you know…drugs and stuff. And they're always up in her room doing something suspicious. That's not even to mention all the drunk old men that come around. I've even seen some men with wanted posters come over. We just can't say anything about it or she hurts us."

"M-Ms. Luna, is this true?" Sopan demanded.

"I, um, can explain?"

She sounded so stiff and unnatural. *I thought I told you to ham it up, Luna!*

Fortunately, it seemed to work in our favor—her very visible discomfort was really selling it!

I turned to her with wide and frightened eyes. "I'm sorry, please don't shoot me for saying all of this!"

"Shoot you?!" said Sopan. "Ms. Luna, you wouldn't use that magical firearm on your own brother, surely?"

His eyes went wide with horror. Time for me to look *really* sad.

"B-but she always uses her Healing Shot right afterward, so no one can tell that she hurts us. It makes all the scars disappear, and she gets to watch us suffer."

Luna looked horrified. She slapped her hand over my mouth to shut me up. Sopan was at a loss for words. With that last bit, we'd managed to completely shatter his image of the virtuous Luna, healing people at the temple for free.

"Do you really use that sort of violence?" Jonathan asked. "Against your own brother and sister?"

Luna fidgeted. She'd gone bright red. "I, um, I…may or may not…at times…I mean…"



Jonathan had heard everything he needed to. He got to his feet, enraged. “What a vulgar woman! That really is inexcusable. Let us forget this ever happened!”

Excellent decision, old man!

Lola and I smiled, already congratulating ourselves, but Sopan didn’t budge from his seat, even when his father called for him.

“Daddy, I know some of Luna’s actions are a little problematic, but as long as she isn’t violent toward *me*, we have nothing to worry about, do we?”

Uh oh! This guy was a more powerful foe than I’d anticipated.

Sopan’s father looked almost as shocked as we were.

“Cleric by day, violent monster by night,” said Sopan. “The contrast turns me on. People are so much more interesting when they have more than one side to them, don’t you think?”

Crap! He was only getting more determined. We had to think of something—quick!

“My sister has always been violent to those closest to her,” said Lola. “It’s hard to imagine that you’d be the exception, Mr. Sopan.”

“Nonsense. Money will solve that.”

“No! I’m sorry, but my sister cannot be moved by money. She enjoys watching people suffer too much!”

What a horrible thing to say! Of course, it wasn’t even remotely true, but Luna looked wounded all the same. Nevertheless, Sopan wasn’t convinced *at all*. He just kept insisting that she would shower him with love instead of violence. What was going on here?

“I want to speak to you alone, Ms. Luna,” he said. “I trust my gut, and it is telling me that you are kinder than you look.”

Ooh, so he’d rumbled us. *That* was the problem. It seemed Sopan had a better nose than his father.

Luna seemed to pick up on it too. “Thank you, Lola, Sir Noir, but you have done quite enough. I should have just been honest from the start.”

Our little farce was over. Luna looked Sopan straight in the eye.

“I have no intention of marrying you, but I could not turn down this meeting without hurting a dear friend. That is the only reason I am here.”

Sopan made a dismissive gesture. “I really don’t care. Are you with anyone?”

“N-no, not really.”

“Then there is no need for you to think about marriage. At least, not yet. I shall come and see you every day until I convince you. Until I steal your heart.”

Oh no! Our enemy had revealed his final form! I mean, sure, I guess there had to be *some* people who enjoyed being pursued like that, but this guy was something else. I was sure he’d end up a real stalker.

I looked at Luna and Lola, but both of them seemed to be out of ideas. There was nothing for it. I’d have to use my ultimate weapon. I gestured to Luna to get her permission and she nodded silently.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Sopan,” I said. “But my sister *is* deceiving you. You see, she hides her true form with a special skill. Fortunately, I have a spell to show you what she *really* looks like!”

Butterface — 200 LP

I cost a heft 800 LP to Bestow it on Luna, for a total of 1,000 LP. I’d wanted to avoid using it, but this guy had left us with no other choice. As soon as I was done, Luna’s face twisted into something hideous.

“What in the world…?” Sopan was in shock.

“Could you love her like this?” I asked calmly.

“I’m going home,” he said, getting to his feet. “Clearly, I should have been more thorough in my investigations.”

Boom! I had discovered my enemy’s one weakness. We were victorious! I still couldn’t resist asking Sopan one thing before he left.

“Tell me, what would you do if you married a beautiful woman, then she got in a terrible accident and ended up looking like this?”

Sopan scowled. “I’d dump her ass, of course.”

“So looks are the only thing that matters?”

“They’re not the *only* thing,” he said. “Just the *most important* one. If you fell in love with a kind woman, would you stay with her when she turned violent? Of course you wouldn’t, you bloody hypocrite. This is no different. Goodbye.”

And with that, he and his father swept out of the room.

What a pair of asses! I mean, wasn’t a relationship about the love and memories between two people? Even if that person’s appearance changed, you’d still love them. At least, that’s how I felt about it. Someone like Sopan would probably just laugh at me and call me naïve.

As soon as they’d left, I used Editor to destroy the Butterface skill for 300 LP. At a total of 1,300 LP, this had been one expensive date. More importantly, Luna’s face returned to its usual form. For a moment, I was impressed by how powerful these skills were—they could even alter the very fabric of reality.

“You must have used a lot of LP on that,” Luna said. “I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it wasn’t that much. And besides, Sopan and his father are going to repay me.”

After all, they’d told the establishment to put everything on their tab as soon as we walked in the door. They may have left, but we were still getting our meal!

“Look, Mr. Noir!” Luna said. “Shrimp!”

I smiled. “Don’t mind if I do!”

Since we weren’t paying for it, I stuffed my face with enough food for lunch *and* dinner. Everything was so delicious! The steamed shrimp almost fell apart in my mouth, and the sashimi was heavenly. We ate until I felt like I was about to burst. As we headed out of the restaurant, Luna stroked her belly suggestively.

“Look, Mr. Noir! You got me pregnant.”

I nudged her playfully. “Stop it.”

“Heh. Well, let me know if you ever want to make that a reality.”

We were both smiling, but Luna looked serious.

“I want you both to know how grateful I am for what you’ve just done for me,” she said. “I know that money is important, but there are other important things in life too, and I think I already have them all in spades.”

Lola and I flashed her a thumbs-up, and Luna finally cracked a smile. It truly was so good to have friends.

“Is there anything that either of you need help with?” Luna asked. “I want to pay you back for all your kindness.”

“Hmmm, I can’t really think of anything in particular,” said Lola. “Although…I have been struggling a little with my makeup recently.”

Lola was lovely even without makeup, but image was all-important for receptionists. Makeup was just another weapon in their arsenal.

“Of course!” Luna said. “What about you, Sir Noir?”

“I suppose…there is one thing,” I said at last. “I really want to save my master.”

I couldn’t stop thinking about Olivia, suffering down in that dungeon while we were stuffing our faces. If there was a lead on the fifteenth floor, then I needed to get strong enough to face it, no matter what it took. I opened my mouth to explain it to Lola and Luna, and everything came spilling out. They listened carefully.

“If there’s anything I can do, I’ll do it,” Luna said at last. “Whenever you need me, Sir Noir, just ask. But I am sure you will overcome this challenge. You always do!”

“I agree!” Lola said. “But I’ll support you from the shadows while you run headlong into danger, Mr. Noir. Don’t you worry!”

“Thank you, both. I’m going to do everything I can to save her!”

This was probably the toughest problem I’d faced yet, but I wasn’t about to give up.

I said my goodbyes to Lola and Luna and headed for the dungeon.

Level: 148

Current Weapons: Two-Edged Blade (Sharp Edge, Good Luck); Piercing Spear (Piercing); Shield of Champions (Durable, Fire Resistance [Grade A], Water Resistance [Grade A], Wind Resistance [Grade A]); Unnamed Mallet (Stone Crusher); Octopus Killing Harpoon (Octopus Killer [Grade S])

Skills: Great Sage; Get Creative; Bestow; Editor; LP Conversion; LP Conversion (Money); LP Conversion (Items); Stone Bullet; Holy Flame; Lightning Strike; Thunderbolt; Water Drop; Icicle; Iceball; Blinding Light; Swordsmanship (Grade C); Archery (Grade S); Exploding Arrow; Throwing (Grade B); Jumping (Grade A); Alchemy (Grade B); Discerning Eye; Discerning Eye for Items; Variable Visual Acuity; Pocket Dimension (Grade C); Dungeon Elevator; Exorcism; Excavate; Improved Lunge; Improved Side Step; Improved Back Step; Passive Defense; Magical Fusion; Deodorize; Lucky Lecher; Shoulder Rub; Night Vision; Tail; Headache Immunity; Poison Resistance (Grade A); Paralysis Immunity (Grade C); Heat Resistance (Grade A); Petrification Immunity (Grade A); Abnormal Condition Recovery (Grade C); Mental Status Effect Immunity (Grade C); Courage; Hearing Protection; Dancing; Diving; Zero Breathing

That was where I stood as I headed back to the hidden dungeon to tackle the thirteenth floor.

I took the Dungeon Elevator straight down and stepped out into the long hallway leading toward a vast, open arena. The floor was made of dirt, dry and dusty, and I really didn't like the idea of how easily it'd get churned up in a fight. Wasn't like I had much choice, though. I steeled myself and stepped out into the arena.

The center ring was surrounded by huge, step-like tiers of seating for the audience, stretching up toward the sky. Even more impressively, the place was completely full. The audience all looked human, but I was sure the dungeon had created them. Some of them were so far up that they just looked like dots.

In the center of the arena, there was a man dressed like some kind of host or ringmaster hyping the crowd up.

“Ladies and gentlemen, our next challenger has finally arrived. Here he is, ready to get himself annihilated!”

It was annoying, but I held my tongue. The whole crowd swelled with a roaring cheer. I could have sworn some of them were chanting, “Die! Die! Die!”

Guess there was no question about who was the away team here.

Directly opposite, another corridor led into the darkness below the arena. Maybe that’s was where I’d find the stairs down to the next level. The entrance was closed off with metal bars but, as the host started shouting again, two teams of men pulled them open.

“And now…it’s…Bernardo the Tiger!”

Almost before he’d finished speaking, a huge tiger charged out of the opening and swept across the distance between us. He lunged gracefully through the air, striking out with its claws. I used Side Step to dodge out of the way, and it was just as well that I’d upgraded the skill. This thing was *fast*!

I fired off a few small Stone Bullets and managed to hit the tiger in the eye with one of them. It didn’t do any real damage, but it stopped the creature for long enough that I could use Discerning Eye.

Name: Bernardo the Tiger

Level: 148

Skills: Sharp Claws; Overpowering Roar; Empowered by Death Fivefold

He was the same level as me. I decided to investigate his skills a little more.

Overpowering Roar: Freezes all creatures in a three-yard radius. Consumes a large amount of stamina.

Empowered by Death Fivefold: Greatly boosts the wielder's power for three minutes if the user makes five kills within thirty seconds.

Both of those sounded annoying, and the tiger could roar without warning. It'd probably be best to stay out of close combat.

"Grrr!"

Eek!

Turned out, Bernardo could lunge and roar at the same time. I skipped back to safety, but the tiger was still lightning quick. I fired an Iceball at his feet to slow him down, freezing him in place. Before he could thaw out, I pulled my Enchanted Bow of Progress and some Exploding Arrows out of my Pocket Dimension and fired one off. It struck Bernardo before he could get out of the way and promptly exploded. Thanks to the Enhanced Archery skill on the bow, all the offensive abilities I used with it were augmented further. I'd obtained the bow during the Gaien incident in Honest, and it was already proving to be extremely useful.

"You just won't die, will you?!" I shouted.

Bernardo glared at me with bloodshot eyes, but I could see a smoking wound in his body where the arrow had struck. The tiger had clearly taken some damage. This time, when I fired off an arrow, Bernardo ran away from me—jumping over the wall into the crowd and… surely he wasn't going to…

"Yikes!"

Nope, he definitely *was* going to do it. Bernardo attacked members of the audience indiscriminately—roaring to freeze them in place, then biting off their heads and tearing them apart with its claws. After he'd killed five or six people, he returned to the ring.

Level: 248

Skills: Sharp Claws; Overpowering Roar; Empowered By Death Fivefold; Fire Resistance (Grade B); Water Resistance (Grade B); Thunder Resistance (Grade B); Ice Resistance (Grade B); Pain Tolerance (Grade A)

He’d gone up a hundred levels?! Worse than that, he’d gained a ton of elemental resistance skills too.

The tiger lunged at me again, and I threw the largest Stone Bullet I could manage straight at him. It struck him right in the head and the blood trickled down his muzzle, but Bernardo didn’t even flinch. That must have been that A-Grade Pain Tolerance skill. Pain was nature’s warning system, stopping creatures from putting themselves in serious danger. That skill allowed him to ignore those red flags. Really, it was more of an offensive skill than a defensive one.

I couldn’t parry his charge with a sword, so I pulled out the Shield of Champions and braced myself for impact.

“Ugh!”

My feet skidded through the dirt as I tried to hold my ground, but at least I wasn’t overwhelmed. Somehow, I managed to counterattack, pulling my trusty double-edged blade from my hip and—

“Rwaaar!”

Crap! I can’t move!

My body was stiff as a board. I was stuck like a statue with my sword raised over my head while Bernardo launched toward my defenseless body.

Move! Move quickly! Move, or you’ll die!

But I barely managed to twitch before the tiger was on me. His claws tore through my skin, but fortunately, I managed to get away before he did too much damage. As soon as I could move again, I leaped as far back as I could.

“Rwaaar!”

That was close! I barely got out of range in time. I braced myself, preparing to dodge again, but the tiger stayed where he was—panting and out of breath. He had overused that roar skill and exhausted himself.

This was my chance! I stopped making poorly thought-out attacks and used Editor to put an end to the situation.

My first priority was breaking that Empowered by Death Fivefold skill, but destroying it would cost 1,800 LP. Instead, I Edited “boosts the wielder’s power for three minutes” to “one minute.” That reduced the cost to a much more reasonable 500 LP, and I was pretty sure it had been over a minute since he killed those five people, so I went ahead with it.

Sure enough, Bernardo’s level promptly dropped back down to 148 and all his elemental resistance skills vanished. Before he could jump into the crowd again, I fired off another Exploding Arrow, aiming for the same place I’d hit him before.

Bernardo let out a low, pained howl. He tried to keep fighting, but his movements were sluggish and pained. This time, I nailed him with a normal arrow, but it was enough to finish him off. The tiger slumped down into the dirt and died, and the host’s voice rang back out through the arena.

“What a stunning upset! The challenger, as weak as he looks, has overcome the first trial! Ladies and gentlemen, please give this scrawny pipsqueak a round of applause!”

A weighty silence fell on the arena, but then, I hadn’t really expected a response. I was more worried about the other thing the host had said.

My *first* trial?!

Sure enough, my next opponent walked slowly into the arena. I thought about trying to get past them and into the corridor beyond, but in the next second, the iron gates slammed shut. I’d have to take this guy down first.

The enemy in front of me was humanoid and clad in gleaming silver armor. They were clearly much smaller than me, which seemed rather unusual. I tried to use Discerning Eye to figure out why, but their information and abilities were concealed. However, I *could* get a read on the morningstar they were carrying: an A-Grade weapon with the skill Shockwave. The skill did more or less what you’d expect, creating a blast

of air during an attack, but that was all I could get. What's more, their plate armor had C-Grade Physical Defense.

"Ladies and gentlemen," shouted the host, "please welcome the Armored Knight to the right! I know you can't *wait* to see him in action!"

The crowd responded with an appreciative roar, but I had more important things to worry about.

For starters, the morningstar was generally classified as a blunt striking weapon. There were a number of variations, but the one the knight carried had a large spherical head with a number of sharp spikes attached to the handle by a long chain. It wasn't hard to imagine how it worked—namely by spinning it around on the chain and using the centrifugal force to attack.

Sure enough, the knight spun the flail about his head, and a moment later, the ball came hurtling toward me. I took off running as fast as I could, getting out of the way of the strike but not the explosion that followed as soon as the ball hit the ground. That Shockwave was really something else.

"Whoa!"

I'd managed to get clear, but the blast swept through the entire arena and knocked me off my feet. I tumbled over and over before coming to a stop and taking up a defensive posture. Unfortunately, the impact had scattered dirt into my eyes and mouth.

"Argh! Gah!"

I choked and rubbed my eyes, trying to bring everything back into focus. I couldn't even rely on my ears because the spectators wouldn't shut up! One thing was for sure: If I stayed in the same place, I was done for. With that in mind, I started moving, but as soon as I did—

Bam!

The head of the flail slapped into the dirt right next to me, and I was sent flying again.

"Whoaaaa!"

I know I'd always said I wanted to fly, but this really wasn't what I meant! I hit the ground headfirst and skidded across the arena. There had to

be some way to catch my breath, but if I paused for even a second, I'd be toast.

I jumped back to my feet and fired off an Icicle, but the Armored Knight skillfully deflected it with his morningstar. Next, I launched a max-size Stone Bullet at him. The three-foot rock sailed through the air but fell short of hitting him directly.

Perfect! Just as I'd planned!

It was extremely easy to kick up clouds of dust in the arena, so I used it to my advantage—by memorizing the knight's position before he disappeared from view.

The knight didn't say anything, but he looked flustered as the dust cloud rose up and swallowed him. As soon as he was gone, I pulled out my Piercing Spear and charged toward him, thrusting with my entire body weight toward the spot where he'd been standing.

The spear entered the dust cloud and immediately encountered something hard, but while the knight's armor had a physical defense ability, my spear had a piercing skill. With a running start, it would get through the metal with no problem.

Fortunately, my aim was good. The knight collapsed to the floor, and I drove my spear between the joints in his armor to deliver the final blow. I had no idea what kind of monster he was exactly, but at least it was over.

"What an unexpected turn of events!" the host cried. "Who could have predicted it?! Which of you ever imagined that this mere boy could defeat the Armored Knight?!"

Honestly, I was mostly just surprised the host was safe. Things had gotten dicey down here during that last round. But that was two rounds down, which meant I only had one more to go, right?

Ugh, I'm getting tired.

Before my next trial, I walked over to the Armored Knight and retrieved his Shockwave Morningstar. Then I stowed it away and waited. Finally, my final opponent entered the arena.

He was a lizardman covered in vermillion scales who had two horns growing from his head. He kind of reminded me of a dragon, although his

upper half was bare and he wore pants that cut off below the knees. Luckily, his build wasn't so different from mine. I tried to use Discerning Eye on him but, once again, it didn't work.

However, from appearances alone, I could tell he was quite skilled, and his weapon was…wait. That sword looked strangely familiar. I promptly used Discerning Eye to check.

It was called the Blade of Growth, and it had five skills: Sharp Edge, S-Grade Destructive Edge, S-Grade Enduring Edge, Flame Blade, and Wave Slash.

I know that sword!

"Noname, is that you?! What are you doing here?!"

But Noname didn't respond. Strange. He had been so talkative on the twelfth floor. Maybe he'd lost his spirit? But why did a lizardman have *that* sword of all the possible—oh, yeah. I got it. I thought it had been strange that the dungeon gave me a weapon that could so easily increase its power. It had even handed me a bunch of easy enemies to help build it up! Turned out that the dungeon was just leveling the sword up to give to this lizardman. I probably should have been used to the sting of betrayal by now, but it still hurt.

Before I had too much time to dwell on my feelings, the lizardman lunged in for the kill—swinging Noname and unleashing a Wave Slash at me.

"I taught you that!" I complained, dodging out of the way.

The lizardman fired off one Wave Slash after another. I had to start running laps around the arena to avoid them. Was there some way I could take the weapon back? The fight would turn a lot easier if my enemy didn't have a weapon that was effective at long range *and* close quarters. For the time being, I focused on dodging out of the way, hoping he would drain his stamina.

"Hissss…"

At least I was managing to annoy him. Once he realized that he couldn't get me with Wave Slash, the lizardman stopped firing off ranged attacks and enveloped the blade in fire. I really didn't want to get hit with

the Flame Blade skill. Even if it didn’t set me on fire, the sword still had S-Grade Destructive Edge, so it wouldn’t make much difference to my life expectancy either way. Although…did the S-Grade version of that skill mean the blade was much more likely to break?

I settled on blocking with the Shield of Champions and attacking from behind with magic. The lizardman moved like he’d been training with the sword since he was a child. It was quite a while before I got an opening to counter with a Lightning Strike.

“Hssssrrrrrgg!”

Electricity shot from my fingertips and spidered over his body. While he was paralyzed, I bashed him as hard as I could with my shield, then lopped off his right hand—taking the sword with it. The lizardman staggered back, clutching at the stump of his arm. I put my shield away and picked up Noname.

“I did it! This is going to be awesome!”

But I shouldn’t have let my guard down. The lizardman whipped out with his tail, aiming straight for my heart. I barely got away in time to avoid it. I’d heard that some lizards could regrow their tails if they got cut off, but this guy was clearly a step above that—he was already regrowing his hand. Strands of goo hung from his new fingers and he leaped forward. This time however, he wasn’t aiming for me. Instead, he destroyed one of the boulders in the arena.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

He was so strong! He probably could have killed me with his bare hands. It didn’t take me long to work out what he was up to—he needed some appropriately sized stones. When he found one that fit nicely in his hand, he flung it at me.

“Huh?”

Fwing!

The rock hurtled toward me, and I instinctively raised Noname to block. Somehow, I managed to deflect it, but only by pure chance. The lizardman’s throwing was impressive—he must have had an A- or S-Grade skill for it.

Time to pull my shield out again. The rocks weren't anything special, so I hunkered down and started launching Wave Slashes from behind it.

"Gah?!"

The lizardman spluttered, stumbling back. The slash connected in a direct hit, slicing his body in two. I really didn't want to watch him regrow a whole new set of legs, so I activated Flame Blade and charged forward, burning his head clean off.

Finally, I plopped down onto the ground beside him.

"Ugh, I really hope that's the last of them."

If a fourth enemy appeared, maybe I could try to escape. Although, if I called the Dungeon Elevator now, I'd probably just have to start all over again the next time I came down here. But the audience groaned in disappointment, and my fears proved to be unfounded.

"How awful!" cried the host. "How dastardly! This mere child has bested all of our heroes. How could this be?! Well, I don't want him to kill me, so I'm going to open the gate."

The path forward opened up, and the audience didn't seem like they were about to riot either. Time to get out of here before anyone changed their mind. I shuffled toward the gate in a very unheroic manner, when suddenly the host started shouting again.

"Oh, what is this?! I have a bad feeling about this guy!"

Crackle crackle crackle…

What was it now?!

Thunder rippled through the arena, followed by black lightning. Soon, a crack opened in midair, revealing black nothingness and within it a rider on a red horse. The horse was majestic, but I couldn't take my eyes off the rider. He had long black hair, and he would have looked human if not for his fierce red eyes. He wore no helmet, but his black armor was edged with gold. He carried a black lance, and I didn't have to use Discerning Eye to know he had high defensive stats.

"The strong one," the rider rasped. "Where is he…?"

I stood there in silence for a moment. I had to remind myself to look at his abilities.

Name: Black Lancer

Level: 666

Skills: Devastation Thrust; Elusive Thrust; Javelin Throw (Grade S); Total Magical Resistance (Grade B)

Are you kidding me?! I might as well just give up now!

This had to be the creature that Dory told me about. Even a cursory glance at his stats convinced me that I didn't stand a chance.

Was he really looking for me? He had to be, right? But instead, the rider turned toward the screaming audience.

"Where is he…?"

He spurred his horse on, and it leaped easily into the crowd. Once the Black Lancer was over the wall, he started spearing everyone who tried to run.

"I don't want to die!" cried the host. "I'm too young to die!"

The guy was out of his mind with fear, but when he turned to run, the lance flew out of the crowd and speared him straight through the head. I had to admit, that was a spectacular throw. Before I could spend too long admiring it, the Black Lancer turned his horse toward me.

"Sometimes it's just best to hit the bricks!" I reminded myself.

Time to make a break for the exit. It was right in front of me, but the Black Lancer wasn't far behind. He retrieved his spear from the host's body and drew back his arm, aiming it straight at me.

I have to make it. I have *to!*

If I didn't, I was dead.

I reached the gates and, sure enough, the stairs were at the end of the hall. But I could feel the lancer right behind me. Goosebumps sprang up all over my back.

“Not even the weak shall escape,” he intoned.

Moving almost by instinct, I parried the lance with the flat of Noname’s blade. A horrible screech chased me down the corridor, but I had faith in this sword. Or maybe I just had faith in the Enduring Blade skill I’d given it.

Either way, my trust was tragically misplaced. Noname crumbled on impact, and I tumbled to the ground.

The whole world spun around and around. My only thought was getting away. The stairs were right in front of me. If I ran as fast as I could, I might make it.

“I see that you are not one of the weak,” said the rider.

At least that’s what I thought I heard him say. I was so afraid that I might have imagined it. At any rate, I reached the stairs and managed to tumble down to the fourteenth floor. An impenetrable darkness flooded out from the bottom of the stairs, but I didn’t have time to investigate. If the Dark Lancer had appeared on Dory’s floor too, then he could probably appear anywhere.

I reached the checkpoint for the fourteenth floor and hurriedly summoned the Dungeon Elevator to return to the second. I still don’t want to think about what would have happened if I hadn’t.

“Master, please listen to me. I almost died!”

<Aren’t you always almost dying, Noir?>

“I mean, yes. But this time, it was serious! I’m sure even you would have a hard time with a Level 666 opponent!”

<Don’t be silly! The Great Olivia has bested opponents with four-figure levels!>

“You…you have?! Master, I think you might be the real monster here.”

<Really? How rude! Anyway, sounds like you did the right thing by running. The way you are right now, you probably couldn't put up much of a fight.>

She was right. Despite how powerful Noname had become, one thrust from the lancer had destroyed him. Even the Shield of Champions probably wouldn't have stood up against those attacks.

<At least he doesn't seem to be targeting you specifically, so you probably won't encounter him often. If you're worried about it, why don't you take the Dungeon Elevator down and wait until it recharges before you explore?>

She was right, just like always. And this was the first time I'd run into the Black Lancer. The timing had just happened to be particularly bad.

<Although…it is said that he wanders aimlessly around the deeper floors. The further down you go…>

"St-stop it! Don't try to scare me!"

<Ah ha ha ha! But you look so cute when you're scared!>

This was no time to be joking around! It just sucked all of the tension out of the situation and…wait a second. Was that what she was trying to do? I mean, I did feel much more relaxed now. Was she trying to make me feel better?

The moment that thought entered my mind, Olivia guffawed so hard that I dismissed the idea instantly. She was just trying to mess with me, as always.

"I have to go," I said. "But don't worry. I'm going to find a way to get you out of here."

This time, it was still light when I left the dungeon. But I'd been through three tough fights and I was exhausted, so I headed straight home.

That was the plan, anyway. But for some reason, I kept running into people. It wasn't unusual to happen upon other adventurers, but today, I seemed to encounter a lot of them who wanted to know what guild I was in. That was always a dicey situation. The answer I gave could provoke wildly different reactions.

"I hear Odin's been hard at work lately."

“Tch.”

“Scram, scumbag!”

And so on.

There were a lot of polite people, but there were just as many who didn’t even try to hide their animosity. I’d just brushed off another curious stranger when I noticed something weird.

Out on an overlook, a woman was facing off against a group of three people—Luna. And Leila was in the group facing her. This was trouble. Like me, Luna was in Odin, but Leila was in Lahmu, our rival guild. We’d joined forces temporarily during the Phantom Thief incident, but generally speaking, relationships between our guilds were strained. As I got closer, I realized I was right to be concerned.

“This is our kill. Get outta here!”

“No. My shot hit first. You *clearly* fired your arrow once it was already dead.”

Wow, it had been a while since I’d seen Luna so worked up. She was normally so coolheaded. She was arguing with a man in his twenties who sported a rather unusual moustache.

“All right, guys,” I said, slipping between them. “Stay calm.”

Luna and Leila smiled at me, but it only made the mustachioed man scowl more.

“What, you know them or something? We’re trying to have a conversation here. Stop sticking your nose into other people’s business!”

I raised my hands. “I just want you to hear me out.”

There was a dead rabbit between them with two fatal wounds. From what they were saying, I gathered Luna had killed it with her magical firearm, and that when she went to retrieve the kill, this other guy hit its corpse with an arrow. Leila was doing her best to calm the mustachioed man down, but the guy who was with them kept egging him on. Things were getting out of control.

“That’s Luna’s kill,” said Leila. “We were too late.”

“What?! Whose side are you on exactly?”

“I’m just looking at the situation objectively.”

“Screw objective!” he said. “You’re Lahmu, aren’t you? What’s ‘objective’ about siding with Odin? You’re out of line!”

Actually, I’m pretty sure it’s you who’s out of line…

To be fair, Luna seemed worked up too. At this rate, the argument would turn into a brawl. I really didn’t want to get dragged into something like that.

“Luna, I’ll find you another one,” I said. “Will you let them have it?”

“But…”

“Please?” said Leila. “As a favor? I’ll pay you back, I promise.”



“F-fine.”

With both Leila and I looking at her imploringly, Luna gave up the rabbit. The mustachioed man tore it from her hands and spit on the ground as he walked away. What an attitude.

Leila bowed her head in gratitude. “I’m sorry, Luna. I probably should have stood up to him, but Lahmu has done so much for me. I owe the guild.”

The guild was the only reason she could pay for her and her brother’s living expenses, but she didn’t seem very comfortable there.

Luna must have noticed it too. “You know,” she said, “you could always leave. I’m sure Odin would be happy to have you.”

The mustachioed man spun around. “I heard that! You’d better remember, Leila: defecting to a rival guild means war.”

Leila sighed. “I know.”

“And we don’t look too kindly on people who bite the hand that feeds them!” he shouted, still walking away. “Come on. I never want to see you with these guys again.”

The absolute nerve of this guy!

“A lot of Lahmu’s members have short tempers,” Leila said, seeing my annoyance. “But they’re not bad people. Please, try to be understanding. And I *am* sorry about the rabbit, Luna. I promise I’ll pay you back.”

She bowed again in apology, then rushed to catch up with her guildmates.

When we were alone, Luna sighed.

“I only wanted the rabbit to feed the local children,” she said.

“Come on. I’ll help you find another one.”

“Thank you…wait! You’re wounded!”

I looked down at my chest. “Yeah. I had a run-in with a tiger in the dungeon. Don’t worry, it’s nothing serious.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t notice! Come here. Now, then. Healing Shot!” She fired her signature healing magic at the wound on my chest, and

it closed in a breath.

“Thanks, Luna.”

It really was helpful to have a healer around. *Maybe I should try to learn a skill like that?*

Half an hour later, we’d collected several rabbits and were on our way back into town.

Chapter 6:
The Little Person and the Copy

I HAD ONE MORE FLOOR to go before I reached the fifteenth, but I was sure that things would only get harder. I had to focus on making myself stronger. After class the next day, I went to the teachers' lounge to speak with Ms. Elena.

"Is there some sort of super-strong, all-purpose skill? Something you would want?"

Ms. Elena crossed her legs and drummed her chin with her fingers. There was something sexy about how she did that.

"I get the idea you're someone who can get things done, even if you're not particularly adept at them," she said. "A sort of jack of all trades, master of none."

Oof! Straight through the heart!

I guess she was just trying to say I was an all-rounder, but "master of none" was hardly flattering, was it?

I started to think about whether I should start using Get Creative to specialize, but Ms. Elena had another suggestion.

"Don't try to force yourself to become something you aren't," she said. "For now, I think some kind of sword skill would suit you best. Like how your friend Leila has Demon Fist."

That skill *was* exceptionally powerful. Leila could use it to take out weaker monsters in one shot. Since I generally used a sword, maybe Ms. Elena was right. Was there something that would do the same thing for swordsmen?

"Have you ever fought anyone who used a sword who you found especially difficult to defeat?" I asked.

She must have thought of someone that she didn't like, because she grimaced. "I once fought someone with a great dodge and an extremely

powerful slash attack. We were interrupted before we could finish our fight, but I don’t think I would have won.”

Someone who could drive Ms. Elena into a corner? That sounded promising. I asked her about the skills she mentioned, already determined to acquire them.



Willowy Dodge — 800 LP

Power Slash — 1,000 LP

Looking into them, Willowy Dodge required a high level of concentration and could fail in specific situations, while Power Slash boosted your offensive power and speed with a blade but at greatly increased stamina cost. What's more, the movement itself was rather expansive, so I'd be leaving myself open to attack. Timing and judgment would be critical.

I wanted to pick up some midrange skills, but those two would do for now. After all, I needed to do some more training in the dungeon.

Today, however, I had some adventuring work with Emma and Luna. They were likely already at the guild hall, so I headed out. When I reached the school gates, I found Leila waiting for me.

"I wanted to thank you again for yesterday," she said. "Is there anything I can help with?"

"I mean, we're going to pick up a quest and hunt some monsters," I said. "But I'm not sure if your guild would be happy if you joined us."

Leila shook her head. "No. I think it will be fine. I'll help."

With that decided, we headed to the Odin guild hall. It wasn't a good idea for Leila to come inside, so I headed in alone. I soon found Emma and Luna and headed toward them to explain the situation, but something seemed off. Even Lola looked flustered.

"Emma, did something happen?" I asked.

"Yes! It's really bad! A little girl was kidnapped just outside town by goblin thieves!"

That *was* really bad. Goblin thieves did abduct children for food from time to time, and it generally didn't take long for them to tuck in. We were officially in a race against time. Fortunately, the request had only just come in. Her parents were even still in the guild hall—the mother was crying, and the father was trying to comfort her. Apparently, the girl had only been taken half an hour ago, at the foot of the mountain near town.

"We'll do it," I told Lola.

After all, most of the other adventurers were off on other requests.

“Of course. I expected nothing else of you, Mr. Noir.”

If I had Emma and Luna with me, I figured I could handle it.

The girl’s father bowed his head to us. “Please, save my daughter!”

“We will. Can you please tell us her name?”

“Sena Hitaru,” he said. “She’s five years old. She wears her hair in pigtails. Please help!”

We had everything we needed. We headed out of the guild hall and explained the situation to Leila.

“I’ll help you,” she said.

I didn’t argue with her. I’d never fought goblin thieves before, but I’d heard they could be troublesome. It would be better to have her with us. The four of us hurried together to the mountain where the girl had been abducted.

Great Sage, where is the girl, Sena Hitaru, who was taken by goblin thieves?

<She is 723 yards to the northeast.>

Now that we knew exactly where she was, all we had to do was come up with a plan. Unfortunately, none of us had any experience fighting these kinds of monsters.

“I’ve heard they steal all sorts of things.”

“Yeah, me too. Apparently, they take weapons and even skills!”

“They must have some kind of special skill to do that.”

“Which means that we can’t drop our guard.”

That made things tricky, but time was of the essence. We hurried in the direction the Great Sage had indicated. But before we got into this, I wanted to check everyone’s current abilities.

Name: Emma Brightness

Level: 68

Skills: Dual Wielded Daggers (Grade A); Wind Strike; Wind Slash; Run Like the Wind

Name: Luna Heela

Level: 74

Skills: Magical Firearms (Grade B); Energy Shot; Healing Shot; Increased Magic Capacity (Grade A); Fainting Spell; Lift Curse

Name: Leila Overlock

Level: 160

Skills: Boxing (Grade A); Kickboxing (Grade A); Hand-to-Hand Combat (Grade A); Stoneskin; Stealthy Step; Demon Fist

Weapon: Magic Glove (Magic Conductivity)

It looked like everyone had leveled up on our trip, not to mention all the work they'd been putting in. Luna had even increased her magic pool, so she wouldn't have to worry about passing out unless she *really* overdid it. Leila's Hand-to-Hand Combat skill had leveled up too. That was Leila for you. We were in pretty good shape for this!

We slowed our pace as we saw smoke rising in the distance and crept toward the clearing where the goblin thieves were camped. There were eight of them in total—all around five feet tall. They had long, pointed noses like normal goblins, but they also had thick heads of greasy hair. Half of them were unarmed, and the other half had clubs.

The biggest one was probably the group's leader. I watched closely as it gestured at the other goblins, giving out orders. They had a fire going and were setting up a spit to cook Sena on. I was too far away to use Discerning Eye, but I could hear Sena crying, and we didn't have time to spare.

"Let's go!" I shouted, jumping out into the clearing.

The others were right behind me.

“Reeee!”

The goblins snarled and swarmed around us, emanating hostility.

“I’ll get Sena!” Emma shouted.

“Good idea!”

Meanwhile, I focused on taking out the goblins. I drew my sword and charged toward their leader. If I could figure out a way to deal with him, the rest of this would get easier.

“Reeee!”

“Huh?”

My sword disappeared, clean out of my hand! Curiously, it somehow reappeared in the goblin’s hand. What kind of trick was he using?!

Name: Goblin Thief

Level: 53

Skills: Gambler’s Pilfer; Superhuman Strength (Grade B); Jumping (Grade B)

I couldn’t let my guard down. Its stealing ability was clearly a skill.

Gambler’s Pilfer: Consumes magical power to randomly steal a weapon, tool, skill, or memory from a target. Weapons are the most likely steal, whilst memories are the least likely. If the pilfer fails, it consumes a large quantity of magic regardless.

That was *terrifying*. And risky! If the skill failed, you could easily burn through all your mana and pass out. But goblins weren’t very smart. Did it even realize the danger?! Either way, I needed to get my sword back. I also needed to make sure that everyone else was safe.

Looking around, I saw Emma split the goblin nearest to Sena clean in half with a Wind Slash, while Leila was busy exploding goblin heads, one

after another. Meanwhile, Luna had snuck around behind the goblin I was facing.

Bwing!

My double-edged sword went flying.

“Augh?!”

The goblin collapsed to reveal Luna standing behind him. She’d shot my sword straight out of his hand!

“Thanks!”

But it wasn’t over yet. The goblin and I both grabbed for the sword at the same time. I kicked him away as hard as I could but, before I could grab my sword, one of his friends launched toward me.

Pew! Pew!

Luna took it out with covering fire. I seized my sword triumphantly and charged toward the goblin leader. He staggered back and I whipped my blade around, cutting him down with a single swipe.

There were only two left, and one was already fleeing, with Leila in hot pursuit. I went after the other. It snarled and pointed its club at me, probably imitating some human it had fought in the past. It seemed like a good time to try out my new skills. This guy was the last one, and even if I failed, my friends were here to back me up.

I rushed forward and performed a Power Slash. It was a huge, extravagant swing and gave the goblin plenty of time to raise his club and block it. Unfortunately for him, my sword sliced both him and his club cleanly in half.

“Oooh, that’s powerful, but I can feel my heart pounding.”

I would probably struggle to use it more than once at a time. By the time I caught my breath, Leila was back with the final goblin corpse in tow. We rushed over to Emma, who was carrying Sena in her arms.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” I asked the little girl.

“No, the soft and fluffy lady protected me.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I said. “She has always been very kind.”

Emma looked embarrassed by the compliment. “I-I guess I can’t argue…”

Before we went back, we made quick work of taking apart the goblin thieves for materials. They were rare, and I wanted to make sure we got anything that might be useful. Afterward, we took Sena back to town. She was very brave and never cried once the whole way home, although of course, the tears came pouring out as soon as she saw her parents again.

“Mommy! Daddy! I was so scared!”

“Oh, Sena! I’m so sorry! It’s okay!”

We watched them and smiled. This really was one of the perks of the job. Emma even gave me a little high five in celebration.

“Be careful around the mountain in the future,” I told Sena’s parents. “There are certain times when monsters are more likely to appear.”

“We will. Thank you. Thank you so much for saving our daughter!”

We said goodbye to Sena and her parents, then headed into the guild hall to collect our reward.

It was Sunday morning, and I was helping out in the shop. I put the goblin thief parts out for sale, along with some materials from monsters I’d defeated in the dungeon. We also had the herbs and materials that Tigerson had collected. Also, I could use alchemy now, so it would probably be a good idea to produce or refine some more products. Sales were good, and my parents’ clothes were getting finer by the day. They’d even started wearing fur coats—in the middle of summer.

“I’ll let you handle the rest, Tigerson. I’m heading home.”

<*Indeed. Take care.*>

He’d become really good at attracting customers, so I headed home without a care in the world. As I went, I picked up some interesting food to boost my LP. Technically, I had access to LP Conversion (Money), but I wanted to save that for emergency situations. After all, 1 LP cost a

whopping 100,000 rels. At that rate, I would burn through my entire savings and not even earn 1,000 LP, so I only planned to use it when I had to.

Currently, I had 3,400 LP. I'd spent a lot on producing new skills, but Emma had been keeping me topped up with kisses and hugs. Even so, maybe it was time to use the LP Conversion (Items) skill. After all, my Octopus Killing Harpoon had served me well on the water level of the dungeon, but it wasn't likely to see action again. And it had an S-Grade skill on it, so it would probably earn me a lot. In the end, destroying it gave me an extra 2,800 LP, so it was worth it.

"Guess it might not be a bad plan to buy things with skills on them and convert them for the LP."

My alchemy skill could help with that too. My options were definitely improving.

I was almost home when I stopped and turned my head to listen. Was that…someone shouting in the yard?

"I came here to hang out!"

"Well, *I* came here to hang out and make out!"

"What did you just say?!"

"Nothing, did I?"

Why did those voices sound familiar? I headed inside to discover Emma and Lola waiting for me.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"I came here to visit you," Emma said.

"Yeah?" Lola shot back. "Well, so did I!"

So that was how they'd run into each other.

"All right, all right," I said. "Why don't you *both* come in? I'll make you tea."

We headed into the living room and I served them some tea, along with a few snacks my father had brought back. We all sat, happily eating them together.

“Oh, what about these?” I asked. “They’re the boiled grasshoppers my mother made.”

“I, uh…” Lola said. “I think I’ll pass this time.”

“Me too,” Emma said. “Your mum’s cooking is delicious, but sometimes it’s a little…you know.”

I guess Mother did have the occasional catastrophic kitchen mishap. I thought the grasshoppers were tasty, though.

We sat around for a while, eating snacks and chatting about everything and nothing—how my father’s newfound wealth was earning him more influence, and who was dating whom in Odin. But after about an hour, Lola stood up suddenly.

“Wait! I didn’t come just to eat snacks and chat! I came here to help you save Ms. Olivia!”

Emma frowned. “Olivia? What are you talking about?”

“Sorry, Emma,” I said. “I haven’t had a chance to tell you about it yet.” I gave her a quick overview and explained why I needed to reach the fifteenth floor so urgently.

“Oh, then I’ll help too!” Emma said. “What do you need?”

“Yeah, yeah, you can help on some *other* day,” said Lola. “Today is my turn.”

She took my hand and tried to drag me away, but Emma grabbed my other hand to stop her.

“I don’t know what you’re doing, Lola. But whatever it is, you’re doing it here.”

“Oh, well, in that case… If you’re sure, I mean!”

Without waiting for her answer, Lola promptly pulled out a blindfold and put it on me. Wait, how long had she been planning this?! It was a little scary not being able to see anything, and there was something warm pressed against my cheeks—probably Lola’s hands.

“Just relax, Mr. Noir. You have nothing to be afraid of. I just had an idea for a little LP-earning game! Emma, would you like to join in?”

“S-sure,” Emma said. “Although…what is it we’re doing?”

We both listened while Lola explained the rules. One of them would hide a cookie somewhere on their person, and I had thirty seconds to find it. And, because of the blindfold, I'd have to rely on my other senses to do it, while the two of them tried to lead me astray. If I failed to find the cookie in time, they could touch me anywhere they wanted. That didn't sound like much of a punishment to me, but who was I to argue?

"What?" said Lola. "You're going to put it *there*?"

"Don't worry," Emma replied. "He'll never figure it out."

What were they talking about? Hopefully they were hiding it somewhere that wasn't *too* embarrassing—a pocket, for example, or the waistband of their outfit.

"Okay!" Lola said cheerfully. "We're ready! Come and get it!"

I took a couple of hesitant steps forward and reached out my hands. My fingers sank into something squishy.

"Eeep!"

Emma made a strange sound and I pulled away.

"Sorry!"

"Oh, come on," said Lola. "Anywhere is fair game, remember? Your only enemy is time."

I tried to remember what Emma was wearing and think of places where she could have hidden it. Of course, it could have been somewhere between her clothes and her bare skin, but she could also have it under her foot or tucked in one of her hands. Wow, this was much harder than I'd expected! I started searching around Emma's waist.

"Oh, Noir, you're so…"

"Are you sure you're not wasting time there, Mr. Noir?" Lola asked. "I mean, Emma's not the only one here, you know."

She was right. Maybe *she* had the cookie. I moved over to Lola and started by checking her hands. Nothing. Did she have any pockets in her clothes? I checked around her stomach.

"I'll give you a hint," Lola said. "It's about eight inches above where you're touching right now, but I won't say if I have it or if Emma does."

I was running out of time, so I reached out for both of them at the same time. About eight inches above where I'd been touching was… something warm and round that didn't quite fit in my hand. I blushed.

"Wait, is it somewhere on your chest…?"

"Oh, Mr. Noir!" Lola teased. "You're so daring!"

She was having fun with this.

"I'll give you another hint," Lola said. "It's near Emma's *most developed* asset. Don't think too hard. Just go with your gut."

"So it's…somewhere on her chest."

"Excuse me!" Emma bit back. "I think you mean my brain!"

Damn it, where was it?! That's when it hit me: They were allowed to lie. The cookie was probably far away from the direction they were leading me. I crouched down and started hunting around the floor.

"N-Noir?" Emma asked.

"Is it under your foot?" I asked. "Or in your sock?"

I patted down their feet.

"You know," Lola said. "If you looked up now, you could see our panties."

"I'm blindfolded, Lola!"

And worse than that, I was wrong about it being around their feet.

"You're out of time," Lola said.

Defeated, I stood up and removed my blindfold, only to see the cookie right on top of Emma's head.

"Wait, really?"

"Urgh, I even gave you a hint!" Emma complained.

She was right. I'd lost because I hadn't had faith in my dearest friend.

"But it was *stimulating*, right?" Lola asked.

Oh, that's right! I'd earned…800 LP? It seemed the blindfold had added another layer of excitement.

“All right, Noir, you lose,” said Emma. “Time to pay up with your body.”

I mean, I wasn’t exactly in a position to argue. I gave in and abandoned myself to them. Lola stared at me hungrily.

“I think I’m gonna go for *you know where*.”

“Wait,” Emma said. “What? You can’t!”

“That’s funny coming from you, Emma,” Lola said. “I *know* you want it too.”

“I…”

Emma glanced at me briefly and looked away, her cheeks turning red like a guilty child. Meanwhile, Lola didn’t have any such reservations. She jumped right in.

“It’s so hard! Wow, Noir, that’s amazing.”

“Ooh,” said Emma, sounding relieved. “*That’s* what you meant.”

To be honest, I was a little relieved too.

“Ms. Emma!” Lola said, feigning shock. “Where did you think I meant? Don’t tell me you thought—”

“I’m doing it too!” said Emma. “I’ve always wanted to. Oh! It’s rock hard!”

Argh, two beautiful women are touching me, but for some reason, I just feel filthy. Why is that, oh, Great Sage?

<Beats me.>

I guess some things were beyond even him.

Although apparently, my butt was very firm.

It was finally time to tackle the fourteenth floor. I headed to the dungeon and used my Dungeon Elevator skill to go straight there. I hadn’t really paid much attention to it the last time, but now I could see it was a

straight corridor with a sign at the end. Beyond it, the way split into four paths, each with a number written on the ground.

The trials beyond this point will vary, the sign read. *If you are a party of one, take the first path. If you are two, take the second. If you are three, take the third. If you are four, take the fourth.*

I'd come here alone, so I guess that meant I should take the first path.

The corridor led straight away from me, but it was *really* long. I must have walked for fifteen minutes by the time the corridor started to feel different. There was a turn in the path ahead of me with another sign on the wall. I paused a long way short of it and used Variable Visual Acuity to adjust my eyesight enough to read it. After all, it was better to be safe than sorry. I didn't want any enemies getting the jump on me.

Do not kill a single one, this one stated. *If you do, you shall have to start again.*

I wonder what that meant. I hurried forward and looked around the corner. The sight on the other side took my breath away. The entire hallway was *moving*. Or at least, something was moving *over it*. There were snakes on the floor, spiders and lizards all over the walls, and some kind of black insects on the ceiling. There were so many of them that I couldn't see the surfaces beneath. Now and then, bugs fell off and spattered down onto the floor like black rain.

A shiver went down my spine. I wasn't afraid of a few bugs, but this was *way* more than just a few. I retreated a few steps to compose myself.

"Guess I'll just have to roast them…wait…"

The sign said not to kill a single one. Really?! That was impossible! If I went anywhere near them, I was bound to tread on something. I couldn't even slap them away if they crawled up my legs! Was I meant to befriend them? I wasn't sure I could manage that.

I stood there for ages, trying to think of some skill I could make that would help, but I kept coming up blank. Still, failure wasn't going to kill me, so out of curiosity I went and trod on a bug to see what would happen.

"Hngh…"

A strange feeling came over me, like falling from a great height. The world distorted, and when it cleared, I was standing somewhere else.

“I’m back at the start of the floor? Urgh, I really can’t get away with killing *any* of them…”

For some reason, that made me feel utterly hopeless. I slumped down onto the floor and sighed. There was no way I could do this. In the end, I took the Dungeon Elevator back up to the second floor.

<Dun dun duuuuun! Noir has arrived!>

“Glad *you’re* in a good mood. I’m stuck.”

<Oooh, and you have come here to rest your head on your dear Olivia’s bosom? Tell me what happened.>

I wasn’t sure about that first part, but I did explain the situation in the hope that she could help.

<Maybe you could try some kind of armor? Oh, but I guess they might get inside the joints or something.>

“Exactly, and there’s no way I could walk down the corridor without killing a single one. Maybe I could put them in suspended animation first? But there are so many! I’m not sure if that’d even be possible.”

<So why don’t you pick a different path next time?> she asked. *<Or ask one of your friends for help. You do have friends, right?>*

“I do, but I don’t really want to bring them here. It’s so dangerous.”

<I know how you feel, but you need to trust your friends. I never had anyone I could depend on. You can choose to live another way, Noir.>

I nodded vaguely and left the dungeon.

Olivia had never had anyone to lean on? Maybe that was why she’d ended up trapped in those chains… No matter how strong you were, if you didn’t have anyone to watch your back, you could never let your guard down. And Olivia was hundreds of times more powerful than me, but, well.

She was probably right. It was best to get help. Still, I wanted to get some fresh air and chew things over on my way home, so I stopped at the Arrone Plains. As I walked through the grass, I caught sight of someone battling a monster. The fighter’s red clothes really stood out. I could tell

from miles off that it was Emma, facing off against a large hare. She'd had so much trouble with them before, but now she cut through them like butter. Run Like the Wind made her much lighter on her feet. She had her opponent wrapped around her little finger long before she used her signature Wind Strike to blow its head to pieces.

"Yeah!" I cheered her on. "Perfectly executed!"

I came closer and checked on her with Discerning Eye. She'd already gone up a level from when I last checked. She was Level 69 now.

"What are you doing here?" she asked me.

"I got stuck on something in the dungeon," I said. "Thought a change of scenery might help."

"Well, at least you can relax here. There aren't any monsters in the area."

"Not anymore, at least," I said, eyeing the dead hare.

We headed a short way into the grass and sat down to watch the sunset. The breeze was warm and light and Emma's blonde hair danced in it. She was so beautiful in the long golden light. No wonder she had so many admirers. I must have used up all my luck just getting to grow up with her.

"I know you want to save Ms. Olivia," Emma said. "But don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

"Don't worry. You know I'm a coward."

Emma shook her head. "You keep saying that, and maybe you're cautious when it's just you, but I've seen you get really reckless when someone else needs your help."

I'd never really thought about it like that. Had I been wrong about myself all this time?

"Don't forget that you have me," Emma said. "I'm always here if you need someone."

It made me feel all warm and fuzzy to hear that. I reached out and hugged her.

"Did…something happen?" she asked.

“I want you to come to the dungeon with me,” I muttered into her hair. “I swear I’ll make sure you stay safe.”

“Noir… Of course I’ll come. You know I’d go to the ends of the earth for you!”

“Thank you.” I squeezed her a little tighter.



Now that it was decided, there was no time to waste. We decided then and there that, the next time we had a break, we'd head to the dungeon.

When the day came, we headed in together. Emma paused while I recited the password.

"Is that how you get in?" she asked. "It's almost like it was written for you!"

"Yeah, I guess it is."

I wanted to introduce her to Olivia, but I decided to leave that until later. Instead, I scooped Emma up in my arms and used the Dungeon Elevator to take us to the fourteenth floor.

"I took the first path before," I explained. "Let's take the second one this time."

"Sure! I'm looking forward to it!"

"Me too."

We smiled at each other.

The second path was another long, unbranching corridor. I was a little worried it would have a sudden turn like the last one, but this time it dead-ended at a door. The trial would be on the other side. Emma and I glanced at each other, nodded, and went in.

As soon as we were in, the door closed behind us. The room was small with amber-colored walls and a square hole about a foot across set into the back wall. Was there…something moving in there?

Before we could react, a surge of tiny creatures poured out of the hole until they completely surrounded us. They were armed with swords, bows, and spears, and there were so many that it was hard for us to move. The little people might have been tiny, but they had a strange intensity. As they lined up, a stone slotted into the hole they'd emerged from, closing it off. We were stuck here. Not that we could have squeezed through the hole anyway.

The tiny people all around us looked almost half-goblin with their long noses and pointed ears. They were no more than eight inches tall.

“Do not underestimate us, giants!” one of them shouted, brandishing a spear.

For such a tiny little guy, he sure had a big voice.

“Hang on!” Emma said, raising her hands. “We don’t mean you guys any harm.”

Avoiding a fight was probably the best course of action, so I followed her lead. The tiny people started muttering and whispering amongst themselves. It made me nervous. I tried to use Discerning Eye on them, but it didn’t work on a single one of them. They were a true mystery.

“If you don’t mean us harm,” one of them shouted. “Give us your weapons!”

Emma and I glanced at each other. We were surrounded, so we didn’t have much choice but to obey. I had ways of accessing other weapons anyway, so we set everything down on the floor. The little people swarmed around our weapons, carrying them off into a corner.

“If you think we’re going to let you go for nothing,” one of them shouted, “you’ve got another thing coming!”

“If there’s anything we can do for you, we’ll do it,” Emma said. “Anything at all.”

The little person shifted. “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” I said. “I mean, if we don’t do as you say, you’ll just attack us, right?”

“Wait right there, both of you!”

The little people gathered together and started whispering among themselves. There were at least several hundred of them. I tried studying them, but they all looked the same to me. There was no way to tell them apart.

However, while they were chatting, I did get the chance to notice the door on the far side of the room. It was probably locked right now, but I bet that would be how we got out of here. The obvious way to unlock the door would be to annihilate these little people. I leaned in to whisper in Emma’s ear.

“Let’s play along for a while, then attack when they drop their guard.”

She nodded. “Got it.”

The little people seemed to have finished consulting with each other.

“We’re hungry!” one of them shouted. “Give us food!”

I had stashed away some rations in my Pocket Dimension, although this wasn’t how I’d expected to use them. “I have bread or fruit. Which would you prefer?”

“One moment!”

They needed to consult *again*?! They seemed almost as smart as humans, and that made things difficult. Even if each individual wasn’t very strong, who knew what kind of damage a swarm of them could do?

“Give us something sweet that we can share!”

Some cookies or a piece of fruit seemed like the best bet. I pulled a banana out of my Pocket Dimension, and suddenly they were all on high alert.

“What was that?!”

“Don’t worry,” I explained. “It’s just one of my abilities. I use it to store things. This is food, see?”

I peeled the banana and put it down on the floor. The little people swarmed around it like ants.

“It’s yellow,” one of them muttered. “What is it?”

Seemed there weren’t any bananas on the fourteen floor. I wondered what they normally ate.

“It’s called a banana,” I said. “They’re popular where I’m from, but a little expensive.”

“Someone, taste it for poison!” one of them shouted.

Another stepped forward and took a bite.

Was the one who’d issued that order their leader? There were so many that there had to be someone in charge, right? Even monsters had

pack leaders. If we could take out the one in charge, perhaps it would throw the others into disarray.

Still, it was best not to jump to any conclusions. For now, I waited while the poison taster chewed on a bite of banana. He let out a low groan and covered his face with his hands. What was going on? All of the others were raising their weapons and shouting.

“You damned giants! You thought you could poison us?!”

“I did no such thing!” I protested. “It’s not poisoned!”

They didn’t look like they believed me, but before they could attack, the poison taster straightened up again.

“It isn’t poison,” he said. “It’s delicious!”

That’s what the groaning was about?!

Now they were sure it wasn’t poison, the others swarmed in to take a bite. When they did, each of them reacted the same way, screaming so loudly with delight that I thought my ears would burst.

“Yuuuuum!”

“It really *is* yummy!”

“I’ve never tasted something so sweeeeet!”

Ugh, watching them all eat like that was revolting. They were ugly to begin with, but watching them grimace and spit everywhere was too much to bear. I glanced over at Emma and noticed her face twitching.

“Hey!” one of the little people shouted. “That banana is mine! Step off!”

“Shut up, I got to it first!”

“How dare you! Do you want to die?!”

As soon as the banana was gone, a fight broke out over the skin.

Oh, was that what we were meant to do? *If we can keep this up, they might just turn on each other!*

In the end, a single banana wasn’t enough to satisfy them all. Emma and I waited to see if they’d continue arguing, but eventually they turned back on us.

“Hey, giants! Give us more!”

“Sorry,” I said. “I only had one of them.”

That was a lie, but I couldn’t exactly start handing them out, could I? If I did, they’d stop fighting. All the same, my idea backfired in the end. Instead of fighting more amongst themselves, they turned their anger back toward me and Emma.

“Then we’ll kill you! Everyone! Attack!”

Guess it wasn’t going to be that easy after all!

“What?!” I said. “No, wait! Stop! I might not have any more bananas, but I do have a cookie. Here.”

I set a delicious cookie down on the floor, but they seemed unimpressed. I’d rubbed them the wrong way by not having another banana.

“This isn’t food,” said one of them.

What were they talking about? Maybe they’d just never seen one before?

“It’s made from wheat flour. You bake it in the oven and…” I realized quickly that my explanation wasn’t going to help. “Fine then. I’ll eat it. I’ll give you something else.”

“Wait! We did not say we wouldn’t eat it!”

They were curious about it after all. But they were cautious too. They had their poison taster take a bite, and the results were much the same as the banana.

“It’s hard, but it melts in your mouth, and it’s yuuuuuummy!”

Thank you, poison taster!

After that, the others started to try and seemed to take a liking to it. Before long, they were demanding more. I wondered how we would have managed if I hadn’t brought any food with me.

Fortunately, I had a few more cookies, so I handed them out. They mowed through them in the course of a few minutes.

“Giants! Entertain us next!”

“Entertain you?” I asked.

“Yes! Do a pig impression!”

Would these guys never be satisfied?

“Woman!” one of them shouted. “Why aren’t you doing anything?!”

“Me? But…”

“Pig impression! Now!”

What a thing to ask of a young lady! Regardless, Emma seemed to be ready for it. She squished her nose up and gave them her best pig impression.

“Oink oink oink oink!”

Silence.

Getting heckled would have been bad enough, but these guys didn’t react at all! They just stared at Emma blankly while she kept oinking. It was almost a minute before they got bored and called it off.

“That wasn’t funny at all. You deserve to die!”

“Umm, but you’re the ones who told me to do it?” Emma said.

Turned out, these guys were just smart enough to be mean.

“No impression then. Just make us laugh!”

I didn’t like how this was going, but right now we didn’t seem to have any other choice. Even so, I couldn’t let Emma embarrass herself again, so this time I stepped up. I pulled a face and put on a funny voice.

“Look at me! I’m an orc! I love meat, but I won’t eat pork! I can’t. It would be too much like cannibalism!”

Silence.

Since they’d asked for an impression of a pig, I’d assumed they liked them, but that didn’t get so much as a single chuckle. Even Emma only looked away from me, embarrassed. Wait. Did I…have no sense of humor?

I’d made a complete fool of myself for nothing! *Just kill me now. How do comedians deal with stuff like this?!*

“Hey!” one of the little people shouted. “Woman! Why do you wear clothes that bare your legs?”

“Because I value ease of movement,” Emma replied.

Seriously? These guys didn’t even know what a skirt was? How would we ever figure out what they found funny?

Emma sighed. She was probably thinking the same thing.

“Hey!” someone shouted. “We’re out of cookies! Give us more!”

It looked like we’d have to find another way out of this. They did seem to have dropped their guard a little, so I figured this was our chance. I took out a piece of bread and set it on the floor.

“This is called bread,” I said. “It’s one of the main things we like to eat. It isn’t sweet, but it’s tasty!”

It was expensive bread too. I’d bought it from a famous bakery in town. But the little people were as cautious as ever.

“Make sure it isn’t poison!” one of them shouted.

It was the same one that had given the order before. Emma seemed to have noticed the same thing.

“Is that their leader?” she whispered.

“I think so. Think you can take him out first?”

“So you *do* have something up your sleeve. All right. Let’s try it.”

The poison taster finished trying the bread.

“It isn’t sweet, and it has a strange texture…but I like it.”

“Good,” said the leader. “Giants! Drop the rest of it!”

“All right, all right,” I complained. “I’m getting to it.”

Poisonous — 50 LP

Bestow — 150 LP

Time to spice up their present a little! The second I set the poisoned bread down, they swarmed all over it. Only the leader didn’t go for it right

away. Damn it, why not?! At least now we had a good chance to take out the others.

“Urghh…”

“My stomach…”

“Hey! Giant! What did you do to them?!”

“Now, Emma.”

“Yessir!”

She fired off a Wind Strike, aiming it straight at the creature we assumed was their leader. In the end, none of them had much in the way of defense. The creature was crushed before it could even scream.

“Boss?!”

“You killed him?!”

We were right about him being their leader. Looked like they’d avoided addressing him directly to stop us from finding out. Now he was no longer a problem, and a good proportion of the little guys had been poisoned. Pandemonium soon followed. Some of them tried to run away while others formed up to make a stand.

“Guess it’s time for us to let loose,” I said.

“They won’t get away,” Emma growled. “Not after humiliating me like that!”

Soon, the peerless duo of Emma and Noir had managed to cause absolute mayhem. Most of the creatures were already dying from the poison, so they didn’t put up much of a fight, and they were weak without their leader. The fight was over in minutes.

“Noir, did you do something to that bread?”

I nodded. “I Bestowed the Poison skill before I gave them the second portion.”

Emma grinned. “You’re so smart!”

We high-fived, and the sound snapped back off the walls. When we checked the door on the far side of the room, it was open, just as I’d predicted.

On the other side, a long corridor stretched out ahead of us. We walked cautiously along it when something grabbed hold of my hand. I almost jumped out of my skin, but in the end, it was only Emma. I still wasn't used to having her down here with me.

"This reminds me of when we were kids," she said. "We used to go on all sorts of adventures together."

"I remember. You were always running headlong into trouble!"

"But it was so much fun!" Emma laughed. "Playing with you like that. It still is. Hey! Why don't we…you know? Do that thing we used to do, where we'd kiss in a cave?"

I paused and turned to look at her. "Here?"

"Of course, silly! Besides, there aren't any monsters here."

She was right. There weren't even any traps. I did as she asked—putting my hands on her shoulders and drawing her toward me. I pressed my lips against hers and suddenly remembered something she'd said when we were younger. How she'd always wanted to be kissed in a dungeon.

"So," I asked. "Did your dream finally come true?"

"Aha ha! You remembered? Yeah, it did. I'm so happy!"

This time, Emma was the one who kissed me. I wanted to take a break until my Dungeon Elevator skill had cooled down, so we took our time.

After we resumed our search, it wasn't too long before we found the stairs down.

"There they are!" Emma cheered. "We made it!"

"Yeah. Hopefully there will be some clue about how to save my master on the next floor."

My heart was pounding as we headed down the stairs. The air was so cold against my skin. As we reached the fifteenth floor, the space opened up, revealing gray walls and a large stone monument standing at the back. As we got closer, I realized it was a human figure, bound in chains. It all looked strangely familiar.

"Wait," I said. "It can't be…"

But it was. The chains were attached to Olivia.

“Master?!”

She didn’t respond. I couldn’t hear her usual telepathic chatter at all. Besides, this couldn’t be Olivia, right?! She was still up on the second floor.

“Hey, look at this,” Emma said.

She was looking at the monument. It had some words carved into the base.

“Release her without killing her, and the path shall open,” I read.

The whole monument was huge. Much bigger than it needed to be for so few words. At least the message was easy enough to understand: Release this thing that looked like Olivia and we could move on to the next floor. I figured the chains around the figure were Death Chains, but there was another set of thin, gold-colored chains wrapped around them. They were called the Chains of Creation and had an S-Grade skill called Duplicate. The figure’s abilities weren’t obscured either.

Name: Death Chain Olivia Copy

Level: 420

Skills: Get Creative; Editor; Bestow; Fireball; Fire Dragon Strike; Improved Fire Elemental Magic

Did that mean this figure was actually *made* from Death Chains? The copy had the same three god-like skills I’d inherited from Olivia, but only had three other skills besides those. That meant it couldn’t be my master after all. The real Olivia had dozens of other skills, and besides, her level was way higher. Had the dungeon somehow used the Chains of Creation to duplicate her and some of her abilities? Even if it wasn’t a perfect copy, it was still terrifyingly strong.

“Does it look exactly like her?” Emma asked.

“Yeah. But it’s *not* her. The dungeon must have found a way to make a duplicate of her. Or maybe she found a way to do it herself. This might explain why the real Olivia is in pain.”

“So should we release her? Looks like that’s the only way to advance.”

“I guess so. I mean, even if we have to fight her, we’d have to cut her free first.”

“Right,” Emma said. “Leave it to me!”

She fired off one Wind Slash after another, cutting the chains that bound Olivia’s double. The wind was sharp as a blade, and the chains crumbled to the floor like string.

“Nnnnnnngh…”

The double stretched like she was awakening from a long sleep. She looked identical to the real Olivia, but she could speak, move around, and open her eyes. It was weird hearing her actual voice. I didn’t know how to feel about it. I wanted the real Olivia to be able to move around like this.

“Are you the ones who set me free?” she asked. “Like, massive props to you. Li’l old Olivia couldn’t get herself out of those persnickety chains.”

Even her mannerisms were the same. So why did I feel so angry?

“The monument said that, if we released you, the path to the next floor would open,” Emma said. “Tell us where it is?”

“Sure!” said the double. “Least I can do, isn’t it?”

She waved her hand artlessly. Suddenly, I had a bad feeling about this. I grabbed Emma and threw her out of the way—just as a massive fireball struck the stone monument, pulverizing it to dust.

“Ah!” Emma cried. “That was close.”

The double shrugged. “Soz. Wasn’t trying to, like, attack you guys. See? Look there.”

The monument was gone. In its place, a narrow staircase led down into the dark. So that’s why the whole thing was so oversized.

“Going straight down?” asked the copy.

“Yeah,” Emma said. “Are you going to try to stop us?”

“Why would I do that?” asked the copy. “Li’l old Olivia here is *much* more interested in taking advantage of her newfound freedom, after all!”

That was it. I couldn’t hold my anger back any longer.

“Don’t pretend to be my master!” I shouted. “You know full well she’s still trapped in those Death Chains.”

“Awwww, you caught me? I’m, like, so shocked…psych!”

“If I defeat you, will it free her?”

“Beats me. But it sure would be fun to test out my powers.”

She was smiling at us, speaking slowly and calmly. The air was starting to turn cold. She was unquestionably strong, but she was an imperfect copy—so we had to have a chance, right?

I fired off a Stone Bullet that was small enough to be quick but large enough to do some serious damage.

Fwomp!

The fake Olivia jumped and kicked the stone up toward the ceiling.

Oh, dear.

“My turn!” she said brightly.

She summoned a dragon made of flames. Even from a distance, I could feel their heat. That had to be her Fire Dragon Strike skill.

She let out a yell, and the fire dragon shot forward. Both Emma and I managed to get out of the way, but the dragon turned around to chase me, almost as though it were alive. I managed to keep out of its way with side steps, but this guy just wouldn’t quit! How much longer was this spell going to last? Given that the fake Olivia had Improved Fire Elemental Magic…

I might be in trouble.

While I was running for my life, Emma turned to attack the double.

“Oh, lemme guess!” said Fake Olivia. “B-Grade or A-Grade Dual Wielding Daggers? You’re not even gonna touch li’l old Olivia with that!”

She dodged all of Emma’s attacks, waiting for an opening, and kicked her.

“Argh!”

Emma tumbled through the air as though she weighed nothing at all.

There was nothing we could do. She was too strong. We had to get out of here. I rushed over to help Emma up off the floor.

“Come on,” I said. “We’re retreating.”

I summoned my Dungeon Elevator and leaped into the hole with the fire dragon still right behind us, trying to give chase.

Chapter 7:
The Fake Olivia

WE ARRIVED ON THE SECOND FLOOR, and I checked Emma over where she'd been kicked. It seemed painful, but she hadn't broken any bones as far as I could tell. What a relief!

<Excuse me, Noir. Who is this girl?! And why would you need her when you have Olivia all to yourself?!>

It was good to see nothing had happened to Olivia. She was still bound up in the Death Chains where I'd left her. I introduced her to Emma and went over everything that had happened. Just as I'd expected, Olivia was shocked to hear she'd been copied. The fact that the double had Get Creative, Editor, and Bestow implied that the copy had been made before Olivia passed those skills on to me.

<She doesn't seem very strong. Should be a cakewalk for you, Noir.>

"Well, that's easy enough for you to say!"

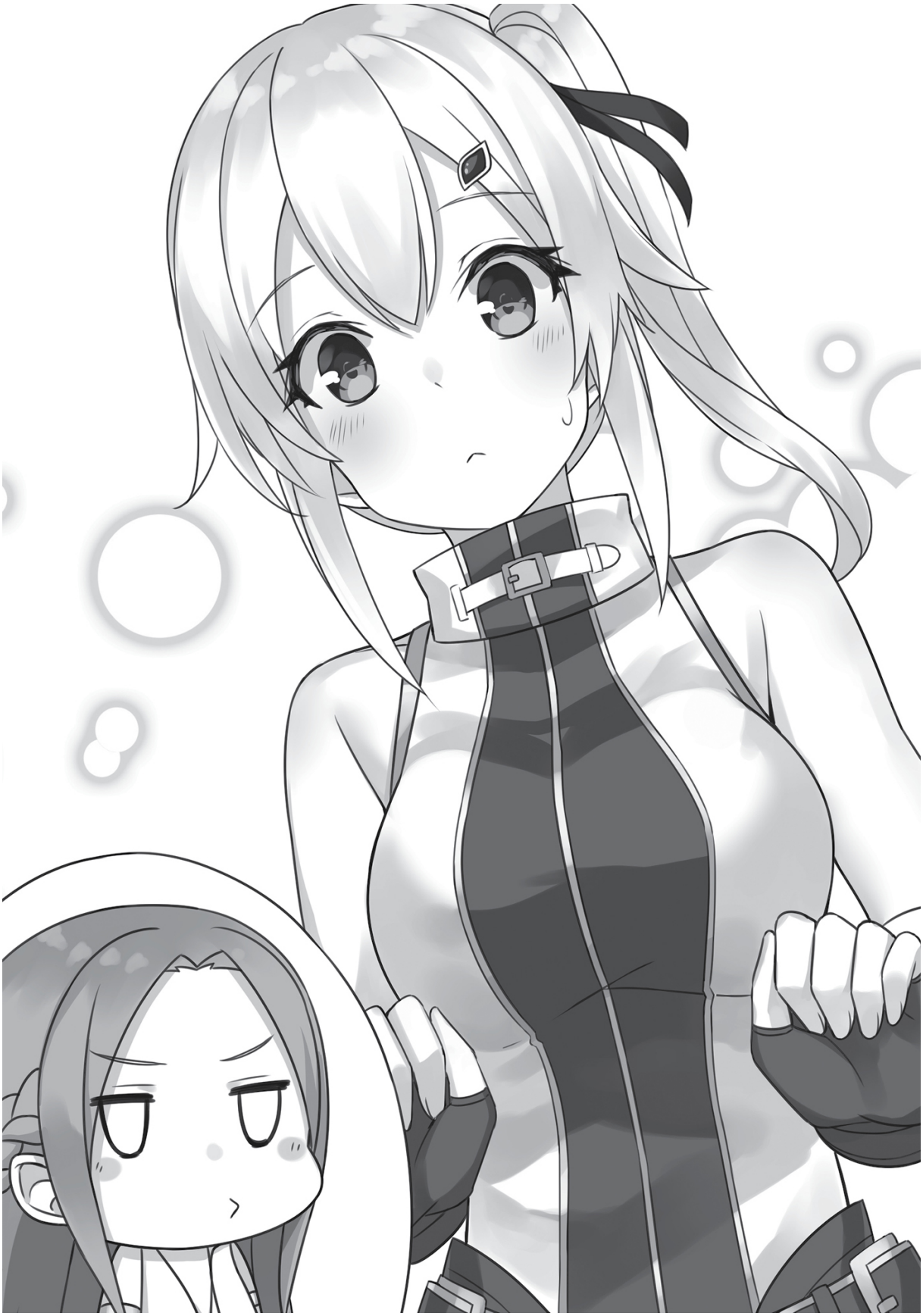
"Ms. Olivia? I hope this doesn't sound rude, but do you have any weaknesses?"

<You're Emma, right? What's your bra size?>

"Uhmm…"

<It's bigger than mine, isn't it? Isn't it?!>

Emma glanced at me anxiously.



“Quit joking around,” I told Olivia. “This is serious! We need to find a way to beat this double. Surely you’ve at least had some close calls before, right?”

<Hmmmm…maybe? Once…I think…?>

“You don’t even remember?”

<Hey! I’m sure it must have happened at some point! Maybe it was even in your town…>

I guess it would have been over two hundred years ago. It had to be easy to forget the details after so long. But she also had to have stories about her exploits. Most of them were probably made up, but I hoped to hear some kernels of truth.

<Why don’t you just ignore her? You already have a way down to the sixteenth floor.>

“No,” I insisted. “I’m going to defeat her. No matter what.”

<Okay, well…I guess I am a tiny bit excited. But remember: The number one thing I need you to do for me is not die. Really, remember that.>

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. And I’m going to find a way to set you free. I swear it!”

After that, Emma and I headed out of the dungeon and went back into town.

“My parents know a scholar,” she said. “I’ll see if they know anything.”

“Thanks. I’ll see what I can find out too.”

We parted ways, and I headed to the largest library in town. It cost a little money to use, but only as much as a couple of meals, so that didn’t deter me. The real problem was that they didn’t lend their most valuable texts to normal people.

I scanned over what I could find about the town’s history and any records of adventurers in the area. Unsurprisingly, Olivia’s name showed up a bunch of times, although the people who wrote the books didn’t seem to

know where her power came from. Most of them just described her overwhelming opponents with a mysterious force.

I had more luck looking into the town history, and I soon found an account of Olivia's stay at a famous inn, as well as her victory over someone called Litorean. But who was this person? They must have been pretty famous to appear in the town records. It was time to do some more digging.

It turned out she had been a well-known cleric who had contributed to the development of the town. Why hadn't I learned anything about her in school? It seemed that a lot of incredible people had lived here in the past.

In the end, I couldn't find any more information about other people Olivia had fought nearby, so I focused my efforts on Litorean. Apparently, she had been skilled at healing wounds but had also been known for having quite the temper. She was described as "tall" and "unusually strong," which I supposed made her both a healer and a fighter? That was all I could get out of the books in the library, so I decided to ask Luna.

When I got to the temple, I was immediately discouraged. Why did the lines always have to be so long? But I didn't really have a choice, so I got in place and waited. It was over an hour and a half before I reached the front.

"Sir Noir!" said Luna. "You don't have to stand in line like that. Why didn't you just say something?"

"Wouldn't be fair on everyone else. Listen, there's something I wanted to ask you: Do you know anything about a cleric named Litorean who lived here about two hundred years ago?"

"Of course!"

Bingo! Apparently, the temple even had a collection of books about her. It was part of their training to learn about famous clerics who'd worked there in the past. I explained the situation to Luna and asked for permission to read them.

"We don't normally allow outsiders to see them, but… Just give me a moment."

Luna approached one of the older priests and bowed her head. She was such a good friend. I was so lucky to know her. It wasn't long before she headed back over.

"He says that you can read them as long as you stay here at the temple."

"Thank you so much!"

The priest showed me into a small room, then brought the books in and set them on the table. I thanked him for his help and started to look through the collection. They covered everything about Litorean's life.

She had been an unusual cleric—as belligerent as she was benevolent. Her personality might have caused trouble, but she'd also saved untold numbers of people. She'd defeated enemies with her strength in combat and made free use of healing magic. Apparently, she'd learned an offensive skill called Sacrifice that allowed her to give up one of her own skills to make herself stronger.

I'd never heard of such a thing. It had to be really rare. A skill could be relearned after it was sacrificed, but it was still a hefty price to pay—giving up in an instant something that had taken months or even years to master. It wouldn't even be feasible for most people, but for some reason, Litorean had the ability to learn skills very easily.

"I see. That's why she was able to sacrifice them, then."

She'd even defeated dragons that way. This *had* to be the person who'd given my master a run for her money. If I had that Sacrifice skill, maybe I'd stand a chance against the fake Olivia.

Sacrifice — 500 LP

Well, that had been much easier to make than expected. It still sounded scary. I needed to check the details first.

User may sacrifice a skill to temporarily raise physical and magical ability. The stronger the skill sacrificed, the more powerful the boost. The duration of the buff is proportional to the number of skills sacrificed: one skill results in a one-minute buff, two extends it to three minutes, and three skills extends it to five.

Wow, that buff window was really short! I'd thought sacrificing a skill would buy you a little more than that. The mechanics of it were complicated too. It seemed like the strongest combination was achieved by sacrificing three S-Grade skills, which would massively buff my abilities for five minutes. But I had to do it all at once. If I sacrificed them one after another, it would only earn me three minutes. I really needed to be careful with how I used this one!

The skill was cheap though, so I coughed up the LP. It must have been unusually compatible with me. But I could use Get Creative to remake any skills I burned, right? Also, how *would* the cost of the sacrificed skills balance out against the buffs they provided? To find that out, I'd have to do some testing.

It was already dark by the time I left the temple. I stopped by Emma's house to tell her about Litorean and to ask her to keep me updated as to what she discovered through her own research. Then I headed home to get some rest.

The next morning, I headed out of town to experiment with Sacrifice. I walked out to the base of the mountain where we'd fought the goblin thieves and took a few moments to prepare myself. It felt like a waste to sacrifice skills just to practice, but that would be better than getting confused and panicking in the middle of a fight. That said, I didn't want to waste a strong skill, so I started with Improved Lunge. It had only cost 300 LP to produce, so I could replace it easily enough. I focused my intent on the skill and activated Sacrifice.

"Whoa!"

An intense feeling washed over me, filling my body with power. I felt as light as air! But I couldn't waste any time enjoying the sensation. I only had a minute before the buff wore off, so I hurried to try out various techniques.

For starters, I fired Holy Flame up into the air. The flames were at least a foot longer than usual. Anyone who knew the skill would have noticed the difference.

Next, I tried Lightning Strike. Electricity jumped from my fingers. Again, the bolts were stronger, and the range was greater than usual.

Sacrifice might have been a temporary effect, but it could still change the inherent qualities of other skills and spells, just like Editor. It was much more impressive than I'd thought.

Time to try out its effect on physical abilities.

I kicked a small tree, which snapped in half with ease, then pulled a bunch of things out of my Pocket Dimension to crush. I'd never been able to do anything like this before but, before I could test it out any further, the effect wore off. It didn't hurt or anything, but the change in sensation was obvious enough.

"So even a common skill like Improved Lunge makes a big difference, huh?"

That was probably how Litorean had been able to afford to sacrifice enough skills to fight Olivia. Although the truly terrifying thing was that my master had still beaten her.

The one problem now was the short window of time the buff provided. If I was going to face the fake Olivia, I'd probably have to sacrifice three skills—I'd need the full five minutes. Fortunately, if I burned all three of my basic movement skills—Improved Lunge, Side Step, and Back Step—it would only cost me 700 LP. From what I could tell, even the weaker skills buffed my abilities two- or threefold.

I wanted to test a more powerful skill, but the thought of sacrificing thousands of LP for mere practice was too much for my miserly heart. I'd just have to save it for the real deal. At least I understood the gist of it now. I could probably figure out the rest on the fly.

I replaced my Improved Lunge skill and headed back toward town. There had been two guards on the gate when I left, but now there was only one. And he looked anxious.

"Is it thieves or something?" I asked.

"Not exactly," he said. "A mercenary was attacked and had all his money stolen."

"A mercenary? Whoever did it must have had guts. And strength."

“Supposedly, the culprit was a woman. Several people were attacked overnight. I’m not sure if the same person was responsible, but you should be careful.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Who’d be stupid enough to go after a mercenary for money? Just the thought of trying to rob someone like Ms. Elena gave me the shivers.

I walked down to the market to pick a few things up. It was still early, and all the shops had just been restocked. I bought some fresh fruit, already sure that Mother and Alice would be delighted.

“Dammit, who is that woman…?”

“She got you too? Is she that strong?”

A man covered in bruises was talking to a guard at the edge of the street. He must have been the mercenary that was attacked. I was curious, so I slowed down to listen.

“She played with me like some kind of demented cat. She even stole my sword!”

“She did?! And you’re no joke with a blade either. What did she look like?”

The mercenary rubbed his head. “Light blue hair. A total knockout.”

Huh?!

That comment stopped me in my tracks. I’d lived in this town for sixteen years, and I’d never seen a blue-haired woman before. I needed to be sure.

“Excuse me?” I called out. “Was this blue-haired woman wearing a white dress?”

“Yeah! Why? You’re not a friend of hers, are you?”

“No! I mean, of course not! I just think I saw her earlier. She was about this tall, and…”

I gave a rough description of my master while the mercenary nodded along. So it *was* her! What in the world…?

Had the fake Olivia somehow escaped the dungeon? I mean, was that even possible? The only reason Tigerson had been able to leave was because he had come from the outside to begin with, but Olivia's double had been made by the dungeon itself. How could she leave?! You needed the password to get out too—how had she learned that?

Does she have a copy of my master's memories too?! I asked myself.

Even after two hundred years, I was sure Olivia would recall the password—it was pretty memorable, after all.

After some more questions, it became clear that the mercenary had been robbed about half an hour ago, but then…the gate guard said several people had been robbed in the night. Had she arrived here yesterday? And why was she stealing money?

I asked the Great Sage for her location, worried that I wouldn't get an answer. In the end, my fears were unfounded. I hurried in the direction he gave me, but no one was there. She had moved on already. There was a bakery on the corner, so I asked the owner if a blue-haired woman had been by.

"Yes, she was here. She bought a *lot* of bread! She was quite beautiful, but friendly, you know? I even threw in some extras."

"And she paid you?"

"Of course!"

"Did she say anything else?" I asked.

"She wanted to know about any restaurants that sold good food and alcohol. Sounded like she was planning a night on the town."

Is she stealing money to pay for a shopping spree?

I asked for the direction she had gone in and headed off in pursuit.

"This is bad."

It was *really* bad. How much LP had the fake Olivia earned already? If she'd spent the whole night indulging, it could be an awful lot. For me, the most effective method of earning it was through sensual thrills, but delicious food was a close second. Achieving things that were important to

you was a good way of earning it too. I'd gained a ton when I got accepted to the Hero Academy.

The same principle was true for my master. Two hundred years ago, her lust had been her main drive, but maybe the fake Olivia's main priority was food. Either way, the more LP she had, the more dangerous she was.

"There you are!" I shouted. "Stop right there!"

She was walking right down the middle of the street. She had some nerve being out in the open like this.

"Aha, Noir Stardia."

Before we could get into it, I used Discerning Eye. Her level hadn't changed much, but she'd gained some new skills. For one, she had Discerning Eye now too. It was the perfect thing to go with Editor. She really did know what she was doing. But before I could look much further into her new skills, I noticed something else. Something that made me want to cry.

Her sword. It was probably the one she'd stolen from the mercenary. It was still sheathed at her hip, but it was insanely powerful. It had Lightweight Blade, Sharp Edge, *and* Thunder Blade. That was a hell of a sword for a relatively weak mercenary. The fake Olivia must have improved it once she took it from him.

"You're checking me out too, aren't you?" she cooed. "I'm doing some peeping myself!"

And then, all of a sudden, I couldn't see the sword's skills anymore. Had I lost my Discerning Eye for Items?!

"Ah ha ha ha! Did you notice yet? I broke it! He he he."

Did she not want me looking at her weapon? No, she was probably just messing with me. That was just the sort of thing the *real* Olivia would do.

I quickly replaced the skill, but I didn't like that she could see right through me, and I had no intention of entertaining her any longer. I rushed her with my blade, and the sound of clashing metal rang through the town. I was fast now, but she blocked my attack as though it was nothing. Our swords ground together and we pushed against each other. She was so

strong! In a contest of pure strength, I would lose. I gritted my teeth, struggling for traction, while she smiled, relaxed. I shoved her back and unleashed a storm of slashes and cuts.

Kling! Kling! Shhk! Kling! Kling! Shhk! Kling! Kling! Shhk!

She blocked my second strike and dodged the third. That was three strikes for me. My pride was dismissed from the field.

“Would you stop that!” I shouted.

“Okay. Byyyeeee!”

I swung again, and she dodged back smoothly. She didn’t even have Improved Back Step, yet she was still far quicker than me. Just how outclassed was I?!

Even monsters would run from a fight like this!

“There she is!” someone shouted. “Get her!”

We’d made quite the scene, and half a dozen guards had spotted us. I didn’t have time to stop them from encircling the fake Olivia. My heart kicked up another notch. She could slaughter them all on a whim if she wanted to.

“Awww, this is depressing,” she complained. “Can’t you just leave li’l old me alone? It’s okay. I’ll even wait while you escape.”

“You think we’re going to run from you?” asked one of the guards.

“Hm,” Olivia mused. “Maybe S-Grade Jumping next?”

In an instant, she leaped over the guards’ heads and touched down on a nearby rooftop. Then she skipped across to another roof, then another, and disappeared out of sight, leaving the guards with their jaws on the floor.

“Wh-what is that thing?”

“Be careful!” I shouted. “She isn’t human!”

“Wh-what did you say?”

“She’s a sentient magical artifact called the Death Chains—she may look like a person, but that’s not her real form. Don’t engage her unless you have to. She’s Level 420!”

“She’s *what*?!”

“There isn’t much time. Please, tell your superiors about this at once.”

As confused as the guards were, they agreed. Hopefully, that meant they wouldn’t treat the *real* Olivia like a criminal when she finally got free. Wasn’t I a good little disciple?

Still, that didn’t help me figure out what to do with fake Olivia. She was so *strong*. I wanted to keep running until I couldn’t even see her with a telescope. At the same time, I had a feeling that my master’s devotion to a life of hedonism meant that she, and her copy, could earn LP much faster than me. If that was true, every minute I wasted was making things worse.

I didn’t want to put anyone else in danger, but there was no way I could handle this alone. Time to turn to my trusted friends.

A short while later, Emma, Luna, Leila, and I gathered in the street. I would have asked Lola too, but despite her superhuman strength, she didn’t enjoy fighting, and her lack of experience made me nervous. I felt bad about getting the others out of bed so early in the morning, but that couldn’t be helped. I gave them a quick summary of what was going on while the rest of the town carried on as normal around us.

“Are the four of us really strong enough to beat her?” Emma asked.

She’d already encountered the fake Olivia, so she understood what we were up against. We could potentially have gone to the guild for more help, but most of the higher-level adventurers were away earning money on expeditions. And I didn’t want to put anyone else at risk.

“We have to try,” I said. “I’ll do most of the fighting if you back me up. If she’s too strong for us, we’ll go to the guild master.”

“I will fight with you, Sir Noir,” said Luna.

“You’ve already done so much for me,” Leila said. “I want to repay you.”

Luna held out her gun, and Leila put her fist on top of it. They were all so beautiful and brave. Finally, Emma placed the flat of her dagger against Leila's hand.

"I'll do what I can. We can do this!"

I added my sword. "We'll take her down. No matter what."

After all, I had my friends with me. What more could anybody want?

Now that we were all decided, I checked on Fake Olivia's location with the Great Sage, and the four of us hurried to find her. She'd already crossed half the town from where I'd encountered her earlier. Eventually, we found her on a bridge over the river that flowed through town. She was sitting on the railing, eating an apple.

"Ooh, you brought friends this time? Think you'll be enough now?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked her. "What do you want with this town?"

"Olivia's job is to give intruders hope, then eliminate them. But I thought about it, and I didn't fancy that."

She must have been talking about her role on the fifteenth floor. I guess we were supposed to defeat her before we could progress to the next level, but she had a copy of my master's personality as well as her body and skills. In the end, she was too mercurial for the life of a dungeon obstacle. Even now, she didn't seem that inclined to fight us.

"How do we free my master?" I asked. "The *real* Olivia."

The double shook her head. "There's no chance. You'll kill her if you try. And besides, why do you want to save her so badly?"

"Because it's the right thing to do. She's spent two hundred years trapped in that tiny room. It's awful!"

"Oh, but she's not *just* trapped," said the double. "She's also in *terrible* pain! But I bet you'd already figured that out, hadn't you?"

My blood went cold. "I *knew* it…"

"And you wanna save her?" she asked. "How adorable! Do you really think you can take me down?"

"I'm sure gonna try!"

I fired off a Stone Bullet, but she jumped onto the handrail and launched herself into the air, landing a fair way back, in the middle of the bridge. It wasn't the worst place for a fight. At least there was no one around at this time of the morning. Time to get things started.

I sacrificed my three basic movement skills and closed the distance between us in an instant. Our swords clashed together. This time, I held my ground.

"Oh, my, you've suddenly gotten stronger!" she said.

I was on more level ground with her, but Sacrifice would only last for five minutes. After that, I'd be hopelessly outmatched again. I'd have to make this quick.

The double muttered to herself as she dodged and defended, still clearly unconcerned by my attacks. Maybe she was using Discerning Eye? She seemed confused about why I was so much stronger when my skills hadn't changed.

"Aww, poor sweet Olivia's gonna lose!" she cried.

I smacked her sword away and she recoiled from the impact. This was my chance!

"Noir!" Emma shouted. "It's a trap! Her sword!!"

Her voice knocked some sense into me. The double's blade crackled with electricity. That had to be its Thunder Blade ability. I tried to retreat, but I'd burned my Improved Back Step skill, so I couldn't get away fast enough. I felt a sharp pain in my stomach, then numbness spread out over my body. I couldn't move! I had C-Grade Paralysis Immunity, but whatever she had was stronger. If I couldn't get out of the way, I was dead meat.

"I win!" Her sword came straight for my neck.

"Aaarrgghh?!"

I braced for the end, but Emma jumped between us—blocking the crackling blade with her daggers. She was protecting me, even though she didn't have any resistance to thunder or paralysis…

"Aaahhhh!"

As soon as I got free, I lunged for the double's defenseless flank. She got away, but at least I'd forced her to release Emma from the electric shock. Luna and Leila jumped into the fray, giving me the chance to catch Emma as she fell.

"N-Noir…are you okay?"

"You should be more worried about yourself," I said gently. "Don't worry, Luna is coming to help you."

"Th-thank you. Be careful…please?"

"I will," I promised. "Just look after yourself, okay? You saved my life."

And now she was suffering because of it. If only I'd been stronger.

Emma passed out in my arms, but her breathing and pulse were steady. Fortunately, her injuries didn't seem to be life-threatening.

Out on the bridge, Leila was struggling to keep her distance from the lightning-covered sword. I needed to do something, but it would cost too much LP to give everyone elemental resistance. It would be easier to break the skill on the sword.

I looked into it with Editor. Breaking the Thunder Blade skill would only cost 400 LP. That suggested that the sword was already on its last legs, which made sense if it was just a normal blade she'd stolen from some mercenary. It wasn't made to withstand all these special skills. It would probably break on its own soon, but I couldn't take any chances. I got rid of the skill and still had 6,000 LP to play with.

"What?!" the double cried.

"You should know better than to drop your guard," said Leila.

As the electricity dissipated from the fake Olivia's blade, Leila went on the offensive. Leila seemed to realize that the double would dodge any attack she threw, so instead she used Demon Fist to smash the sword to pieces. It was time to get in there and back her up.

"Luna, please take Emma somewhere safe and heal her!"

"Got it!"

As Luna got Emma out of the way, the fake Olivia watched them go. Before she got any ideas, I stepped in to block her view.

“She means a lot to you, doesn’t she?” said the double. “I’m so jealous!”

“Eat this!” I said.

Leila coordinated her attack with me. “It’s over.”

But somehow…both of us missed. Despite our confidence, the fake Olivia flitted like a butterfly. We couldn’t lay a hand on her. The double leaped straight up into the sky, easily avoiding our attacks.

“My, my, aren’t you two fiery? How about a little heat to match you!”

That Fire Dragon Strike again?! Sure enough, that awful dragon formed beside her and streaked toward us. At least this time we had more room to maneuver. Given that we could hardly face it head-on, we made good use of the bridge to kite it around while the fake Olivia deftly moved the dragon after us. And she wasn’t making it easy—constantly watching for the right opportunity to shift targets, keeping us both on our toes and protecting herself from any possible incoming attack. Destroying the skill would cost too much LP, but examining it with Editor did yield something useful: The skill had a time limit, and the longer the dragon was summoned, the weaker it became. If we could just keep running, then…

“Leila!”

She almost lost her footing and didn’t respond when I called out. Something was wrong. The fire dragon was right behind her, but she just stood there in a stupor. I pulled out the Shield of Champions and charged toward the fire dragon.

I barely made it in time. Flames roared around the edges of my shield, but its A-Grade Fire Resistance held out.

“Ugh,” said the double. “You’re *so* annoying! I’m leaving!”

“Don’t you dare run away!” I shouted after her.

But it was useless. I couldn’t leave Leila like this. Something was clearly wrong with her.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I feel…like I’m burning up…”

I touched Leila’s forehead. She definitely had a fever. I checked things out with my Discerning Eye and found something that shocked me.

Body Temperature +5 Degrees

Having a temperature of just one or two degrees above normal could cause problems, but five degrees? That was dangerous! The fake Olivia must have done something. How crafty! I broke the offending skill quickly, as it didn’t cost much LP.

“She messed with your abilities. I’ve fixed things, but you need to rest until your temperature comes down. I’m going after her.”

“The moment I’m better, I’ll be right behind you,” Leila said weakly.

I didn’t doubt it. For now, I left her on the bridge and chased after the double. She was skipping away as though she didn’t have a care in the world, so I soon caught up with her. To be fair, she didn’t really need to run. She’d already wiped out the rest of my party.

“Oh, no!” she cried as I got closer. “Looks like someone’s going to catch me!”

“And yet you’ve stopped moving,” I observed.

“Of course,” she said. “This place is perfect for a fight.”

She was right—it was a big level section of road with nobody around. Before she could attack, I checked my abilities. The last thing I wanted was for her to break some skill or another without me noticing. And there was one thing that I absolutely could not let her destroy.

“Worrying about whether I’ll break your ability to Get Creative?” she asked.

“Wh-what?! No!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha! What a reaction! Truly, I’m convinced! Don’t worry, I don’t intend to break your precious skill, and anyway, it would cost too much LP.”

What a relief! Good to know the gift my master had given me didn’t come cheap. Get Creative was my primary skill. Losing it would be a total disaster.

On the bright side, the fake Olivia didn’t have any weapons now. That meant close combat was the obvious option, but unfortunately, my Sacrifice buff had worn off. Of course, I could have just remade the skills and sacrificed them again, but I had a feeling that the time had come to bite the bullet and sacrifice something more powerful. While I was struggling to work out what to do, the fake Olivia vanished.

“Huh? Where’d she go?!”

I looked around, but she was nowhere to be seen, and there was nowhere she could be hiding. Wait! Above me!

I looked up to see Fireballs raining down from the sky. Was her plan to stay out of my way and rain magic down from above? It was a good strategy. With all her fire magic skills, the Fireballs were *huge*.

I dodged out of the way, missing the first, then barely escaping the second. As the third came blazing toward me, I suddenly felt strange. I had to keep running, but I felt slower somehow. I just managed to avoid the third fireball, but it grazed my clothes, and that was enough for the fire to spread. I hit the ground and rolled until it went out.

“That’s weird…”

I checked out my skills and realized she’d given me Heavy. I erased it quickly and fired another Stone Bullet at Fake Olivia as she descended back toward the ground. But just before the stone hit her, it made an impossible curve and boomeranged back at me.

“Gah?!”

There was no way to avoid it, so I ended up eating my own attack. My whole body ached. I was so confused. What had she done?! I hadn’t seen her cast a spell or anything. Was the problem with the skill itself?

Stone Bullet: Consumes magic to generate and fire a stone of five inches to three feet in diameter. It then returns to the caster.

She *had* changed it!

“Oh, you figured it out?” asked the double. “You shot one at me back on the bridge. And you seemed comfortable with it, so I figured you’d try it again.”

Damn it, she was too clever! And observant. And she probably had at least some of my master’s vast combat experience. But the most frustrating thing was how much better than me she was at using these skills.

“You can always just give up,” she taunted. “I’ll let you live. I mean, it’ll be a pathetic and miserable life, but still a life.”

“I’m not afraid of living a pathetic and miserable life,” I shouted back. “I’m the third son of a baronet—I’ve tasted more misery in my life than most commoners. But I’m still going to defeat you.”

“Because you want to save your precious master?” she teased.

“She’s suffering. She deserves better.”

“She’s weak. And the strong make use of the weak.”

She was wrong. My master wasn’t weak at all.

“She changed my life,” I said. “I’m going to save her, no matter what it takes!”

I sacrificed my S-Grade Archery skill and tried not to think about the 3,500 LP it had cost me to make it. It was only one skill, and the buff would only last for a minute, but I could tell right away that the power it gave me was on a whole different level from before.

A Lightning Strike surged through my fingers and leaped out into the air. Its range had doubled, and it reached the fake Olivia with ease. Of course, there was no way she’d let such an obvious attack touch her, but I’d planned for that. I just needed some time to get in close, and with my increased physical strength, a single leap took me exactly where I wanted to be.

“Do you expect me to swoon over how fast you are?” she asked.

She stuck out two fingers and stabbed them toward my eyes.

Willowy Dodge!

I smacked the double in the belly with the flat of my sword and used the momentum to push myself out of the way. It threw her off balance, and I

saw the moment of panic on her face. By the time our eyes met, I'd already made my move.

Power Slash!

I put all my strength behind it. In the end, it was more than enough to take her down.

"Auuugh?!"

It didn't feel like cutting down a human. It was more like severing through metal. As I stood back, the double's hands turned to chains. Soon, the whole of her body was just links of metal that were no longer pretending to be my master.

"I curse you," the thing spluttered with the last of its strength. "I curse you to…"

I couldn't hear the rest, but it didn't matter. It was over. The chains dissolved into rust and melted back down into the earth.

"Curse me all you like," I said. "I have a friend who can break them."

And besides, my thoughts were already elsewhere. As the last of the rust blew away, I turned and ran back toward a certain room inside the hidden dungeon.

I stopped in front of the door to Olivia's room and took a deep breath. I hadn't seen my master on my way in, and that made me anxious. I mean, if I'd freed her, surely she would have left the dungeon already, wouldn't she? I braced myself for whatever was inside and opened the door.

She was standing right in front of me—the chains that had bound her to the walls lying limp on the ground. The real Olivia Servant smiled back at me.

"Noir… I'm free."



My mind took me back to the first time we'd met, while my chest filled with warmth. Before I realized it, tears were streaming down my face.

"Master!" I ran over and dove into her open arms.

She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me against her. "Thank you. For everything you've done."

I was sobbing so hard that I couldn't even answer her.

I couldn't get over how wonderful it was to hear her voice coming out of her own mouth. How real and alive she suddenly felt.

"You've been in so much pain," I sobbed. "For so long. Why didn't you tell me? Didn't you trust me?"

Olivia smiled. "That wasn't it, Noir. You're such a nice boy. I didn't want you charging off and getting hurt. But in the end, you were much braver than silly old Olivia ever imagined. You know, I think I might just fall for you!"

Despite her teasing, I didn't think she'd ever stop treating me like a kid. She stroked my hair until I'd calmed down again.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

"Hooray!" Olivia beamed. "My first taste of freedom in two hundred years!"

We headed up the stairs together. There were a bunch of golden slimes on the first floor that seemed to be waiting for us to attack them. Olivia seemed happy to oblige, defeating them in an instant with a spell I'd never seen before.

"That's…fairly scary," I said. "Are you sure we should be letting you out? You're like some all-powerful dark lord who's just awoken from a two-hundred-year slumber or something."

"It's all those skills I made over the years with Get Creative," Olivia said brightly. "I could beat you too if I wanted to. Lickety-split!"

"Kn-knock it off!" I said, shoving her arm.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha! All right." She put on a sinister voice. "Then do as your dark lord commands! The first thing I wish when we get out of here is…food!"

“Ha ha! As you wish. I shall treat you to as much of my mother’s home cooking as you wish, my liege!”

As we emerged from the dungeon, the clear blue sky seemed to stretch out forever. How long had it been since we’d had weather this nice? Maybe the world had been waiting for Olivia’s return just as eagerly as I had.

We headed back into town, but getting home wasn’t as easy as it seemed. Thanks to the fake Olivia’s rampage, the guards had called for reinforcements. The streets were swarming with them, and soon dozens of them were swarming around my master. Fortunately, I managed to explain the situation without getting us both thrown in jail.

“That’s my boy!” Olivia grinned.

“I’ll have you know, I’ve learned a lot of things!” I said. “All right. Here we are.”

We were finally home. Olivia didn’t have anywhere else to go, so it made sense to let her stay with us, at least for a while.

“Welcome to the Stardia household! Please come in.”

“Don’t mind if I do!”

She pushed past me and waltzed inside before I could even open the door for her.

Some things never changed.

Extra Chapter:
Beyond Eternity

MAYBE THE STARDIA FAMILY felt so warm because I'd spent so long in that cold and lonely room. When I was still living my life, two hundred years ago, I'd never felt this at home anywhere.

And not only was the company enjoyable, but the food was delicious. The soup, meat, vegetables—even the bread was like nothing I'd ever tasted! Either I'd spent far too long down there, or everything had gotten tastier in my absence.

"Master, are you sure you should be eating so much? You've been fasting for so long—shouldn't you start with something easy on your stomach? Like porridge…?"

"Bah! And besides, you should be proud. This flavor is enough to impress one of the greatest adventurers in history! That's me, I mean. In case you're wondering."

"Oh, goodness!" said Noir's mother. "I'm honored! Ms. Olivia, please, try some of this."

Noir's mother was so pleased I liked her cooking that there was no stopping her after that. She went to fetch one of her most recent culinary creations while Noir, his father, Alice, and Tigerson all looked the other way.

"Fish sashimi?" I asked.

"Frog, actually," said Noir's mother. "It's extra delicious if you dip it in soy sauce."

"Huh? What's soy sauce?"

"Oh, it was brought here a while ago by a visitor who came from another dimension."

Rare though it was, people from other dimensions occasionally got lost in our world. Many of them went on to become adventurers.

Apparently, about a hundred years ago, one of them had introduced a bunch of culinary techniques from his homeland.

I tried the black liquid in the little dish she set down in front of me. It was salty at first, and then…the most indescribable flavor filled my mouth.

“It’s delicious! Wow, the people from that other dimension really know how to cook! Wish one of them were here so I could give them a big ol’ hug!”

“There aren’t very many of them around anymore,” said Noir. “But soy sauce is amazing. Not sure I could say the same about what it’s being served with…”

He looked down at the frog sashimi and pulled a face, but it didn’t bother me. I popped a piece of the pink flesh into my mouth.

“Mmm, it’s good!”

The sashimi itself wasn’t too impressive, but the soy sauce made it amazing.

“I’m so glad you like it,” said Noir’s mother. “By the way, Ms. Olivia, it’s quite incredible how you have the same name as such a famous adventurer, isn’t it?”

“Umm,” said Noir. “Maybe I should explain that one.”

He told them everything and, in the process, threw a big wet blanket over the whole atmosphere.

“Ah ha ha ha! No need to be so nervous!” I told them. “These days, I’m just Noir’s kindly master, and he has been my most wonderful disciple.”

“O-ooh!” Noir’s father stammered. “So my son’s been a good student. That’s my boy!”

He jumped up, and we exchanged a high five. It seemed escaping from a dungeon after two hundred years had made me excitable. At least being super-duper positive was better than the alternative.

The next morning, I took some soy sauce and headed out, planning to hunt some fish or meat to try with the new sauce. A lot of things had changed in the last two hundred years, but a lot more was still the same.

Just outside of town, I found a group of adventurers fighting a pair of giant boars.

I fired up my Discerning Eye for the first time in ages and examined everyone there. I might have given Get Creative, Editor, and Bestow to Noir, but I still had a ton of skills I'd made before that. My level had dropped with being chained up for so long, but it was still higher than anyone in the town.

"So the adventurers are all between Level 13 and Level 24, while the boars are Level 34 and Level 31, huh? What a load of weaklings!"

I really wanted to take out those boars and eat them posthaste, but it wasn't polite to interfere. For now, I just stood back and waited.

"Are you a civilian?" one of the adventurers shouted. "You should run!"

"Actually, I'm a top-class adventurer," I said.

"Ha ha ha! Pull the other one!" he shouted back. "What kind of adventurer runs around in a negligée? Just get out of the way, okay? These things are stronger than they look, and I'm not going to break my neck trying to protect you."

"You know, if they're too much trouble, I could take them out for you," I said.

"As if you could! I'd like to see you try!"

The adventurers looked like they were starting to struggle, so I strolled calmly into action. Soon enough, I was right under a boar's giant eye as it closed in on me. I kicked it lightly in the jaw.

The boar's massive body flew several hundred yards and plowed into the ground, killing it instantly. I killed the remaining boar in a flash and dusted off my hands.

"Wh-who are you?" one of the adventurers stammered.

"Do you want one of those?" I asked, nodding toward the carcass of a boar.

"Huh? Oh, uh, yes."

“Fine. You can have that one, but butcher and roast the other one for me. I want to try it with some soy sauce.”

I didn’t have to tell them twice. They promptly started taking the creature apart. Adventurers always had respect for those stronger than them. They also had good survival instincts, and were scared enough of me to agree to whatever I said. While they worked, the most manly of them came over to me.

“I can just tell you’re an S-Grade adventurer or something.”

“Hmph.”

“So, um, we want to get stronger. So we’ve been talking and…will you please take us on as your disciples? We want to become heroes!”

It didn’t matter what time period you were in—there were always people hoping to hit the big time. They seemed passionate about it, but I was unmoved. There wasn’t anything special about them. And besides, if they had time to stand around chatting, they should have been working harder to butcher that boar!

“No can do, buddy,” I said. “I already have a disciple.”

“I don’t mind being number two!” he said.

“I said no. Noir’s enough for me.”

“Aw, man…”

I drummed my chin. “Still, I might make an exception for today. But *only* for today. I could teach you how to fight.”

“Really?!”

“Sure. But I have some conditions.”

Namely, they had to become my servants for the day and satisfy all of my culinary desires. All the same, all five of them happily agreed. I guess they didn’t get many chances to receive instruction from a top-class adventurer.

When the boar was finally roasted, I got to try it with some soy sauce.

“It really is delicious,” I said. “But it could use a little sugar or something. Anyway, let’s try some fish!”

So next, we went fishing. Then we hunted a variety of other monsters and animals, roasted them, and ate them. As we went, I gave the young adventurers the promised instruction in a variety of forms of combat. By the end of the day, it was safe to say they'd learned a lot.

Around dusk, I bid them farewell and sat down on a hill to watch the sun set behind the gently sloping plains.

"How long have I waited to see something like this again?"

The wind murmured through the grass, and the expansive sky opened overhead while the sun gilded everything with a gleam. All these things were so normal, so everyday, that most people didn't even think about them. *I* hadn't thought about them before I was imprisoned. Only after they were taken away did I realize how special they were.

How many things in life were like that? That only seemed to matter when they were already gone? Why didn't people relish every single moment? How could they be so foolish? And why had I never thought about these things, back when I was free?

Regret swam up through me slowly, throbbing in my chest.

"So *this* is where you are!"

"Hiya!" I said. "Long day?"

Noir sat down beside me, and I scooted over to press my cheek against his. I picked a strand of his hair and started playing with it.

"Okay, okay, I'm not a toy!"

"Nonsense! And besides, I've wanted to touch you for ages!"

Noir sighed. "Fine. But only for a little while."

After I was done teasing him, I looked back toward the setting sun. "You know, if you'd never shown up that day, I'd still be stuck down there. Maybe I'd be stuck down there forever."

"You changed my whole life too," he said. "I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"Look at your earnest little face!" I teased. "I lost that kind of innocence so long ago."

“That’s not true,” said Noir. “And besides, you’ve only just gotten your life back. You just need to find something you want to do again, that’s all.”

His words were like cool water for my parched heart.

“Thank you, Noir,” I said. “I won’t give up.”

It might have been two hundred years, but this time, I would live my life protecting the things that really mattered.



Afterword

LONG TIME NO SEE, everyone! It’s been about a year since volume four was released. I’m sorry it took so long to write the next part. Thank you for picking up the fifth volume. I had to check, but it’s been about three years since the first. When I was a kid, the adults always complained about how time flies when you grow up. At the time, I thought they were stupid, but now? I know how they felt. If you lead a lazy life, it can suddenly disappear—which is rich coming from me, I know! I spend most of my days lying around watching TV.

But I want to keep living this life until the day I die. Although I’d like to increase my writing pace a little! This last year, I’ve been dealing with some eyestrain issues, so I haven’t been able to give it my all! (It’s a garbage excuse, I know.)

Either way, I’m happy that you’ve stuck with me this year!

And now for all the thank yous—to all of my readers, to my editor Shou Ji, and to everyone who helped put this book together, thank you all so very much.

Lastly, the third volume of the manga adaptation is now on sale. I’d appreciate it if you checked that out too.

I hope to see you all again in volume six!



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